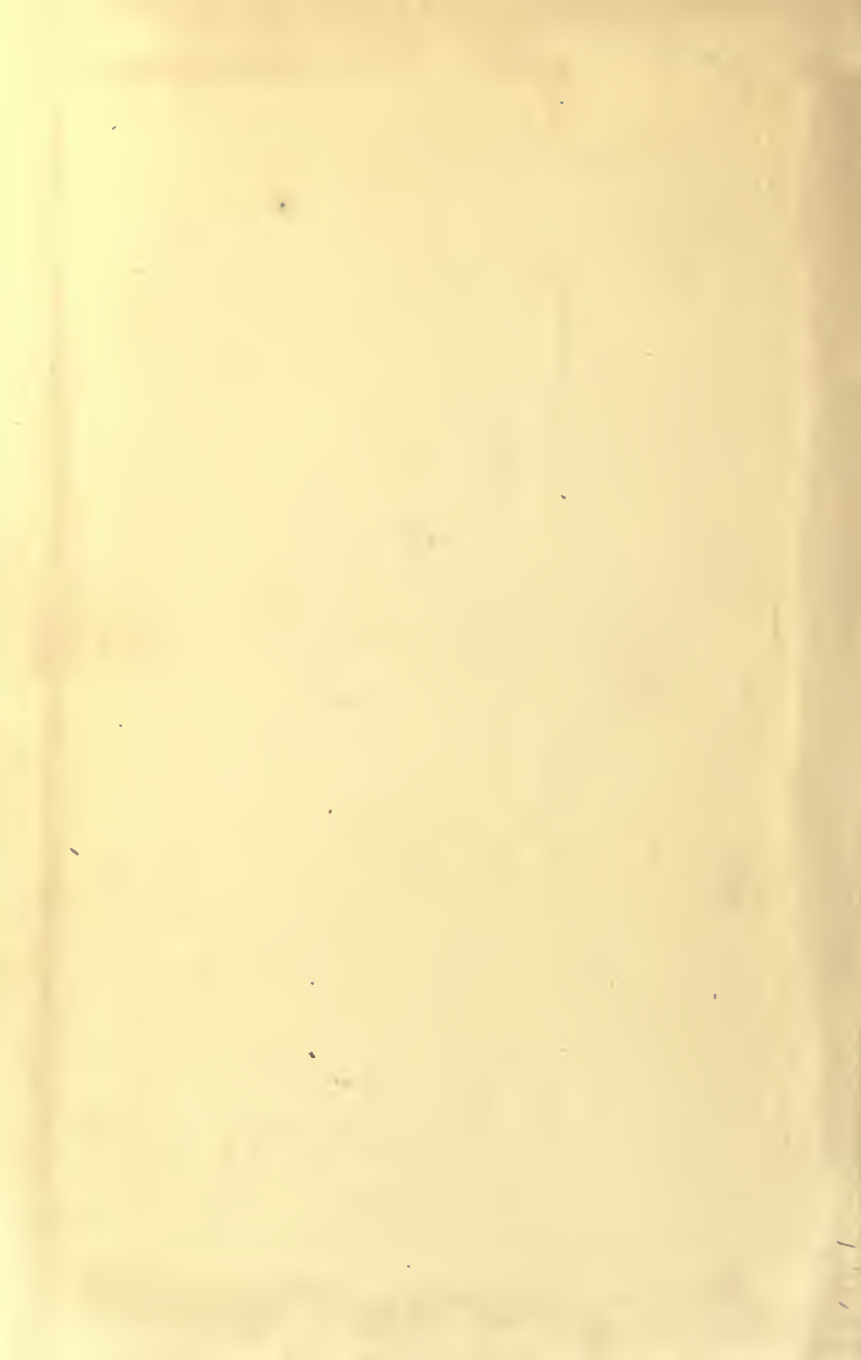


JAMES BEVANWOOD
BARONET

HENRY ST JOHN COOPER





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JAMES BEVANWOOD, BARONET

HENRY ST. JOHN COOPER



JAMES BEVANWOOD BARONET

BY

HENRY ST. JOHN COOPER

AUTHOR OF "SUNNY DUCROW"



NEW

YORK

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CHAPTER I

HOW ENID FOUND HER LOVER

VERY weary, very, very tired of it all, and yet how easily things might be far worse! She had a roof to cover her, enough food for her small wants, clothes, such as they were; the sordid, trumpery finery with which other girls decked themselves had never appealed to her. To her clothes were simply—clothes, and so, easily, things might be worse. There were many other girls who would count themselves as lucky if they could change lots with her.

But for the rest she had a great and unsatisfied hunger, a strange, undefined yearning and longing for something—something she had never known. Here it was always the same—to-day as yesterday, and all the yesterdays and to-morrows—the same sounds, the deep nasal breathing of the other women, the thud, thud of their irons, the indescribable smell that had become part of her very life. The steam, the strong soap, the musty scent of the unwashed linen, all mingled in one familiar whole; that smell was part and parcel of her daily existence, for nine hours a day she had her being in it.

The woman working beside her was very fat, but she

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was a skilled ironer. She worked fast and furious, gasping and panting over her work and snoring in an unpleasant manner.

"Look out!" she said suddenly. "Now you done it, 'Nid!"

The girl started, she came back to life and reality. Yes, she had done it, she had hesitated a moment too long, the goffering iron had made a faint yellow scorchmark on the frilled petticoat she was working at. She hurried on with her work, praying that Miss Henderson's sharp eyes might not see it.

It was always the same, when she got to thinking over her work, she always did something of the kind; she ought not to think.

"She'll know it's you or 'Liz," Jakes, the fat woman, said. "You're the only two goffering to-day!"

"I'll tell her!" the girl said.

"You'll be lucky if you get out of it under five bob!" the fat woman said; then she went on with her work.

The girl went on working, too. Yes, she would be lucky to get out of it under five bob. Five bob meant almost a third of her week's pay, meant the loss of two days. Well, it could not be helped; it would be all the same a hundred years hence.

The floor rocked and the walls gave back the sound of the engine thumping and banging away down in the basement—the engine that was driving the machinery that mangled, tore, crushed and wrenched the dirt out of the linen.

The girl to whom this petticoat belonged, she tried to visualise her. She would be young and happy, with plenty of money; she would have a good time of course, tennis and theatres and parties. It was not fair, it was

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not fair that that girl should have everything and she nothing, just this daily grind, the reek of the soapsuds, the steam and all the rest of it. And, of course, when this girl found the yellow scorchmark on her petticoat she would make a row, she would write a furious letter to Miss Henderson; then the trouble would start.

"Sick of it!" the girl muttered. She had finished the petticoat, she folded it neatly and deftly, laid it aside, and took up the next thing for her irons to operate on.

Now her head was beginning to ache, it always did at a certain hour of the afternoon. It meant that the day's work was nearly over. It was funny that her head kept clear till this time, then started to ache. It proved that she was doing just as much as she was capable of. She looked up and down the long ironing table. There were thirty women here besides herself, women and girls, many of them old and hideous, but they knew their work, and worked like slaves because theirs was piece work, and there were rent and food and other things to be considered. The younger girls took things rather more easily, now and again they talked. Generally it was about some "feller," or a hat, a dress, or the melodrama at the Grand. Somehow they had no sympathy with her, nor she with them. She often wondered why they did not understand her and she did not understand them. They worked here in the Snowflake Laundry together, they ate the same food, lived in much the same kind of house, much the same kind of life, yet they were miles apart.

For one thing, she knew no "feller" to talk about. She hated men, felt a little afraid of them, avoided them. As for the theatre, she never went inside one.

She wanted something, that she knew, that instinct told her, these other girls never even thought of. Her

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heart, her very soul, hungered for something different—a blue sea and a blue sky, wind-swept hills. It was all dim and vague and indistinct. She had never seen the sea in her life, yet she pictured it to herself, a great, a vast sheet of water. She had seen the advertisements on the hoardings of the railway companies, she formed her idea of the sea from those. The sea was always a deep blue, the same blue as the blue they blued the white linen with. There was always a blue sky with a yellow, pillow-like cloud floating over it. There were also specks of white on the blue of the sea. What the specks were she did not know.

But she hungered for it, yearned for it, shut her eyes and saw visions of it, then opened them again and saw the long ironing table and the perspiring women at their work.

And now her head was aching badly, madly. It was a sign that it was time to leave off.

A bell rang for a moment or two, then stopped. Suddenly every one began to talk at once.

"Just about fed up!" the stout woman said. "Lor', don't my arm ache, not 'arf—got a touch of rheumatics in the shoulder, that's what! Now then, big eyes, didn't you 'ear the bell?"

"Big eyes" was the girl. Yes, she had heard the bell. It meant freedom from slavery, it meant that for the next twelve hours she would be free of the laundry smell and the thud, thud of the irons, the clank and shake of the engine down in the basement.

She went out, joining the crowd of women and girls. She went to the long, narrow, dark room where the hats and coats hung. She found her own and put it on.

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"Said 'is name was Alf, and 'e was getting two quid a week!" a girl was saying.

"Don't you swallow all you 'ear!" another girl said.

"'Ello, 'Nid, 'ow's your 'ead, bad as usual?"

"Yes, the same as usual, bad—aching 'orribly!" the girl said.

"Poor kid, you'll 'ave to chuck it sooner or later! It ain't every one's strong enough for it. Why don't you go back to the sorting?"

"I can't stand it!" the girl said. "I 'ate the smell there, and besides, I couldn't live on the money!"

The other laughed. "Well, you'll 'ave to stick it somehow, I suppose, same as the rest of us!"

They trooped out into the street.

It was not a nice street, it was a back street. The Snowflake Laundry was a small, squat, ugly building, along the top of which ran a black board with the name painted on it in white.

"There's the bloke!" a girl said. "There he is—sure as fate 'e's 'anging about 'ere every blessed night; 'oo's 'e after?"

"'E ain't much to look at neither!" another girl said.

'Nid glanced across the street. She saw a young man; he was big and broad shouldered. He was plain faced, very plain looking and commonplace; there was nothing distinguished about him.

"Not much style about 'im, 'ooever 'e is!" a girl said.

The man looked across at the girls trooping out through the wide gate with a curiously eager look in his eyes. He seemed to hesitate, he shivered obviously, noticeably. The girls stared at him, and 'Nid saw a dull red flush come into his cheeks, his eyes drooped. She saw him clench and unclench his hands nervously.

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The girls hurried off in twos and threes; the elder women, mostly carrying small bundles, trudged home.

'Nid was left to herself; she had no companion, no bosom friend among them all. Her own home was not far away, two small rooms in a dingy little house. She paid six shillings a week for them, that left her eleven shillings for food, clothing, fire and light, except when she was fined for something. It looked as if she would be five shillings short in her money this week through that scorched petticoat. Well, she would have to manage on six, she had done it before.

"I wish——" she said, "I wish——" she often said she wished, but never gave utterance to the exact wish. Perhaps she did not know what it was. It had never taken any tangible form, but she wished—there was something she wished for, something different, something——

"I—I wonder if you'd mind me speaking to you?"

The girl turned.

It was the man, he had followed her. He stood before her now, he had plucked off his shabby cap and stood bareheaded before her. She drew back instinctively, into her eyes came the suspicious look, the defiant look of a young, wild animal.

"I don't mean to—to insult you—or anything," the man said. "I only just wanted——" He paused. "To—to speak to you. Do you mind?"

"What do you want to say?" she asked. She almost wondered at herself. She knew that she ought to turn her back on him and walk on, proving to him she was not a girl who could be addressed by any stranger in the street.

He stood before her, big, awkward, tongue-tied, dumb.

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"Well?" she said sharply, "what is 'it?'"

"I—I don't know quite—only I—I just wanted to speak to you, that's all. I—I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind!" There was almost a pathetic look in his face, a pleading in his eyes.

"It's funny your wanting to speak and—and not having nothing to say!"

Her suspicion died out—a sensation of superiority came to her. Somehow she felt herself better and above this man, she did not quite know how or why, but the feeling came, and strangely enough it remained always. She was a superior being to this big, awkward, anxious-eyed man.

"Well?" she said.

"It—it isn't that I've got nothing to say," he stammered, "but—but it's that I don't know quite how to say it——" He paused, then suddenly it came from him with a burst of confidence.

"It's like this—I—I never had a girl. I've listened to the chaps talking of—of girls, their sweethearts, you see—I seemed out of it somehow—they used to laugh at me, said I was too shy ever to speak to a girl——"

"Well?" she said uncompromisingly. "So you spoke to me just, to—to prove——"

"No, it wasn't that. I saw you one night weeks ago, you was coming out of that place. I just saw you and started thinking about you, about you and your eyes, and your little pale face; you can't be very old, can you?"

"I don't see that's got anything——" She paused. "I ain't seventeen till next month!"

"I thought you was about that age," he said. "I'm twenty-three, my name's——" He paused. "Woods—at least, it isn't all my name, it's enough, it's all I use.

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It saves talking and the others laughing about it——”

“Well?” Whenever she said “Well?” it seemed to affect him, he seemed to stiffen up.

“I saw you that night, weeks ago; every night I’ve tried to come along at the same time, just—just to see you—I’ve seen you most nights. Every night I’ve said to myself, I’ll try my luck and speak to her, and—and then I saw those other girls staring at me and laughing and somehow—well, I couldn’t—only to-night I made up my mind, I swore to myself I’d speak and I’ve done it——” He drew a long breath.

“And you don’t mind, you aren’t offended?” he asked.

She looked at him. No, she did not mind, she was not offended. She remembered what the other girls had said of him—he was not their style, he was not anything to look at. The queer sensation that she was altogether superior to him had come to stay. From the height of her superiority she felt she could afford to be a little gracious to him.

“No, I’m not offended! If it was any one else, though——”

“You—you mean you wouldn’t let another man speak to you?”

“I’ve never let another man speak to me——” she said. “Some have tried, only I’ve took no notice; only somehow I don’t seem to mind you so much!”

His face flushed. When he flushed there was something rather appealing about him. She felt she liked him.

“It’s just that I am lonely! I was bred up in the country—I am a carpenter. I am working on the new buildings at the corner of Hyde Street; there’s a heap of others there, six carpenters beside me. Somehow I

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don't get to like them, and they don't seem to care about me—we just work together and talk a bit now and again, nothing much. Usually they talk about things I don't seem to care about."

"Same with me. It's the same with the girls and——" She paused; she did not mean to tell him anything. Considering he was a stranger she was going too far.

"And I—I got longing—longing for some one to talk to, some one as I could understand and who could understand me. Then I saw you, you seemed—different——" He paused nervously. "Just different somehow. I wondered if you'd mind me speaking—I thought you would. Do you mind me walking beside you?"

"I'm going 'ome. It isn't far; I don't see there's no need for you to walk with me!"

"I'm sorry." He stood still. "I won't come if you don't want it." The pleading was still in his eyes.

"Well, I don't mind, then," she said. "Just a few steps!"

He walked beside her, his face lighted up, he looked like a man who had been vouchsafed some great boon, some great blessing.

"My name isn't really Woods, that's what the others think. I didn't mean to say anything to you, but you—I don't want to tell you nothing but what's true. My name's a funny one, I only use half of it; once I had an idea of using the other half."

"What is it?" she asked directly.

"Bevanwood! It's a rum name, ain't it?"

"Bevanwood——" she repeated. "It's a funny name!"

"James Curtis Bevanwood," he said. "There's a rare lot of it, ain't there? I'm called Jim Woods, it's enough to go on with, and——" He paused.

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She knew what he meant. "My name's Foster," she said, "E-nid Foster—mostly I get called 'Nid. Enid's a rum name, like yours, a bit outlandish."

"I like it," he said. "I like it—it sounds jus' right!" He held out his hand shyly, for she had come to a standstill. "I'd like to call you E-nid," he said. "May I?"

"I don't mind!" she laughed.

CHAPTER II

HOW JIM WOODS FOUGHT FOR HIS GIRL

E-NID!" the man said to himself when the shavings sang through his jack-plane. They seemed to sing the word, the name to him. It was the name of his girl—"his girl."

He had built his possession of her on a very slight foundation. He had only spoken to her last night for the first time, perhaps for the last, but in his heart he called her "his girl."

"Consumption, I bet!" a man said—it was Luke, the big carpenter, the bully of the shed. He was cutting mortices in a window frame at the morticing machine.

"That's what she looks like to me," he said as he brought the long lever down, driving the sharp chisel into the wood. "A saller-faced, yellor, big-eyed slip of a thing—ugly as sin!"

Instinct made Jim Woods pause. He was listening.

"Nothing to look at and nothing more'n a kid at that, and thought he was doing himself proud, I bet!"

Luke paused, some one else laughed.

"And consumptive, 'oller-chested and big-eyed. I know 'er sort, she'll start coughing presently; works in a laundry, the steam and all the rest of it——"

They were talking about her! The man stood motionless, quivering, his hands gripping the jack-plane.

"Well, he's got a sweetheart at last, that's something!"

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"Oh, her sort!" Luke said. "The sort as 'ud speak to any man who spoke to her and only too glad!"

"Liar!"

Luke swung round; he saw a man whose face was white and whose eyes glinted and shone savagely.

"'Oo are you——" he began.

"Liar, dirty 'ound and liar!" Jim Woods said.

The other men had dropped their tools. One went to the door to see if the foreman was about. He was not; they looked on with a sense of enjoyment. They knew Luke; he was a huge man—he had fought in the ring once or twice and from his own account had done remarkably well.

But Woods—Woods was no mean man either, though "soft." Somehow they had it in their heads that Woods was "soft," perhaps because he was too good-humoured to take offence as a rule, perhaps because he had no love of fighting nor of strong drink nor of even stronger language.

"A soft chap, Jim Woods," they said, though they were inclined to like him, there was so little to dislike about the man. But the man they knew, the "soft" man, surely this was not he?

His face was white, his eyes gleaming, his lips tightly closed. They looked at him, intending to laugh, yet forgot to laugh when they saw his face.

Luke was rolling the dirty sleeves back from his great hairy arms. His lips were tightly closed, too, his eyes had a dangerous glint in them.

"You—you said——?" he remarked slowly.

"That you was—a dirty liar!" Woods said, and his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural even to himself.

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There was a grim smile on Luke's face; he glanced about him to see that all was clear.

"Move them trussels!" he said, and spoke as naturally as though nothing was about to happen.

One of the men pitched the sawing trestles aside, and then they faced one another, big men both, Luke a shade the bigger, and the more accustomed fighter.

There was not another man in the shop who would have stood up against Luke, not another man who would for a very considerable sum have taken Woods' place; but Woods himself showed no signs of fear, only of a grim determination and a deep, passionate anger.

This man had maligned her, had said she was "the sort as 'ud speak to any man who spoke to her—and only too glad!" The liar, the liar!

"Half a moment, mates!" It was Stainer, the little old carpenter with the grizzled hair. "Woods," he said, "Woods, you'd best give in! You won't have a look in with Luke. Give in, man, and say as you're sorry callin' Luke names!" He had a liking for Woods, he wanted to save the man while there was time.

"Take it back and shake 'ands!" he quavered in his nervous treble.

Woods laughed, a strange laugh for Woods, who usually laughed freely and merrily.

"I—I said it—said as 'e was a liar and a 'ound, and so 'e is, a dirty liar and worse——" His eyes glared, his face was very white.

Naked fists with the knuckles standing out white, brawny arms and heaving chests—most of the men here loved a fight, yet here was something different—something they did not quite understand. A drunken brawl, two men aiming ineffectual blows at each other while

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their arms sawed the air, thick with their cursing, they understood fighting of that kind—but this! Stainer turned deliberately away. He shuddered at the sound of fist on soft flesh. When he took the courage to look again he saw that both were bleeding, and that under their blood their faces were white as chalk.

“Don’t let ’em, don’t let ’em!” he said. He gripped at the arm of the man nearest him, but the other man shook him off.

“Leave ’em alone, they mean settling it!” he muttered.

They did mean settling it! At last Luke had found a man worthy of him. The love of fighting was in him, born in him, it was the breath of his life. Such men as he have turned defeats into victories, have stayed the rush of savage foes, have offered their lives in the service of King and Country with a smile of joy on their faces, for to live and fight and to die fighting—what better can man ask of fate? And this man’s eyes were gleaming with a great and pure joy, and he shook his big head so that the blood was flung from his face and spattered on to the benches and the shaving-littered floor.

“You!” he gasped. “You—you’re a good ’un, a good ’un!” and struck out with all his might.

Woods flung up his arms, he reeled a step as the fist took him between the eyes. He saw dazzling lights and leaping flames of fire. Then he was down, measuring his length on the earthen, pine shavings-covered floor.

“’E’s down!” Stainer whispered. “Thank Gord, it’s over!”

Over! No, it was not over yet; he was down, he lay there for how long? A moment—two perhaps, but that man, the man who was standing now looking down at

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him had said: "She was the sort who would speak to any man—that sort!"

He came back to life, he struggled to his feet, he swayed a little, but the light of battle still burned on in the one eye that alone was of service to him now. Yet with that eye he could see this man, his enemy, the man who had traduced her, and he rushed at him and struck and struck again, forcing the other back by the impetuous fury of his attack, forcing him back against the morticing machine, which stayed him so that he could go no farther; and Luke, fighter though he was, lost his head for a moment, for he had never faced an attack like this, and, losing his head, he left himself open to attack.

Two fists battered his face, his head jerked back, it struck smartly against the iron arm of the machine and Luke's senses drifted for a moment. He staggered sideways and slipped, and as he slipped Woods' fist took him under the jaw, and Luke went down with his head on the iron foot-plate of the machine.

Another man's skull might have cracked, but not Luke's. Still he lay there, for many moments, blinking his eyes slowly, then he rose. It was a lengthy process, but it was done at last. He rose to his feet and wiped the blood from his face with a handful of shavings. Faint now, but unbeaten, waiting for another attack, Jim Woods leaned against his bench.

But there was no attack. Luke came towards him, strangely uncertain and unsteady on his feet.

"You," he said, then paused to spit out a fragment of broken tooth. "You're a fighter! You are——" again he paused and put his big finger into his mouth to rake out the fragment of tooth. He found it and looked at it with a smile on his battered countenance.

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"A fighter!" he repeated. "You're the first as ever downed me, Woods!"

Woods said nothing.

"What I said about that gel," Luke said, "I didn't mean you to 'ear!"

"But I 'eard, and it was a lie!"

Luke nodded. "That's it, a lie! I didn't know, I jest said it for the sake of saying somethink—and pr'aps I was wrong about the other, too, 'er being consumptive, I mean; I 'ope as I was wrong, any'ow!"

"It—it wasn't that—it was what you said about 'er speakin' to——"

"I know, I've took it back, I didn't 'ave no reason to say it! It was a lie, like you said! Woods, you're a fighter, you are! I like a man as can put 'is fists-up! You can! I should think that gel 'ud a been proud of you to-day if she'd been 'ere and seen you fighting for 'er!"

Jim Woods' heart gave a sudden leap. He felt a warm glow in his breast—would she, would she if she had been here? Would she when she knew—be proud of him?

Luke held out his hand. "Mate, I take it all back, every blessed word of it—she's only a kid as yet, that gel, but if I know anything she'll make a beauty one of these days! You ought to think yourself lucky if she's your gel!"

"She is!" Jim said.

"Then you're in luck!" Luke said generously. "You are! She'll be pretty as a oil painting afore she's done!"

Jim Woods smiled, though smiling hurt him horribly. He liked Luke as he had never liked him before. If cutting off his hand would have been of the slightest

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benefit to Luke he would have done it at this moment.

"A good fighter!" Luke said. He paused, he looked about on the bench and found a pair of pliers. For some moments he was busy with the pliers in his enormous mouth. At last, with a terrific jerk, he succeeded. A slow smile came into his face as he looked at the bleeding stump of the broken tooth held in the pliers.

"That's better!" he said. He pitched it away and held out his hand to Jim Woods.

"I've took it back, Jim," he said; "me and you—friends?"

Jim nodded, and they gripped hands tightly, but briefly.

Then the others came to him with their congratulations. Jim Woods had taken on a new importance in their eyes, there were many who had been inclined to look down on him—but never again! They were glad that he had never taken umbrage at them—what sort of figures would they have made in such a combat?

His eye smarted and was painful, so were the bruises and the cut lip, but he seemed to feel nothing. He glowed with a sense of exultation. He had fought for her; a knight of old could have done no more. He had fought and bled for her, and surely that made her his girl!

'Nid took herself to task. She ought not to care; it ought not to matter to her in the slightest whether the man was there or not. Yet it did matter—in her lean little chest, under the thin, ragged print blouse, her heart was pounding rapidly.

Love him—the idea had never even entered her head! She would have scorned it. Love—she knew nothing about love, it was something the other girls talked about

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and for which she had always felt a kind of sneering contempt. If love was anything like what these girls spoke of, then she knew she would never love. But the man had spoken to her. She had lied when she had told him that other men had spoken to her. No man ever had; perhaps she was not attractive enough, perhaps it was because she did not give them encouragement. But he had spoken to her, and henceforth he had become different from any other man in her eyes.

She wondered if he would be there—she knew he would, something told her he would—and what then? They would talk for a few minutes, then part—and then to-morrow night.

It did not make so much difference in her life after all.

Miss Henderson had found out about the scorched frill.

"You, 'Nid Foster," she said. "If Miss Clare kicks up a row about that skirt, you'll have to pay, my girl, and it'll cost you ten or twelve shillings if a penny."

She did not know who Miss Clare was, nor did she care. She felt that she hated her. Because Miss Clare objected, or would object, to the slight stain of yellow on the hem of her skirt she, 'Nid Foster, must forgo two-thirds of a week's money. She would have to go hungry next week through Miss Clare.

The fat woman, Mrs. Melchor, next to her, was panting. It was hotter than usual to-day, the perspiration was running down Mrs. Melchor's fat cheeks in tiny rivulets. She paused now and again to wipe it away. Presently one of the girls screamed out suddenly. She had burned her arm with the edge of a hot iron. The scream ended with an oath. Then the work went on.

It was headache time now. 'Nid looked at the clock.

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Only half an hour more—would he be there? And if he were—what then? And if he were not—why should she care?

A funny name for a man—what was it? Bevan-wood. She laughed at it. Yes, he was right not to use it, Woods was surely enough.

Time at last. She rushed to the long narrow room and fought for her hat and coat. She was, usually, one of the first out. And he was there.

She looked at him and her face turned white, she felt sickened, disgusted.

"The—the beast!" she muttered. "The horrible beast, ugh!"

She never wanted to speak to him again, never wanted to look at him again. She walked on, she heard his step behind her; then she turned, her sallow little face was flushed, her big eyes sparkled.

"Never, never speak to me again," she gasped. "I—I hate you, I think you are horrible, ugh! I won't be seen speaking to you; you are—filthy——!" She turned away.

"Enid, won't——"

"Don't you dare use my name!" she shrieked at him. "You—a low, common, horrible brute!" She glared at his disfigured face, his blackened eye, his cut lip.

"I—I hate such men as you," she said, "hate them." She turned her thin shoulders on him and walked on, and he stood there looking after her.

He was conscious of a feeling of desolation, of vile injustice. It was for her, because of her he had received these wounds—they were honourable wounds.

In the old days the lady would have crowned her battered and disfigured and, in all probability, bleeding knight with a wreath of something or other, anyhow a

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wreath—and she—she had said spiteful words to him, had turned her slender back on him. He felt angry, hurt.

“Anyhow, I s’pose I’m not much to look at at the best of times,” he muttered. “I s’pose most girls wouldn’t——” He looked after her trim little figure. “She’s done with me now, I s’pose,” he thought. He sighed deeply. It was a romance, his first, probably his last, and it was gone out of his life—ended.

CHAPTER III

ATONEMENT

A WEEK had passed, a week of days just the same as all other days. Only there had been Sunday—Sunday she had lain in bed the whole day long, had stretched her limbs and shut her eyes and had revelled in the luxury of complete idleness. Besides, it was cheaper to stay in bed, one meal sufficed for the whole day; she only wanted to sleep.

She pitied other girls who dressed themselves up in uncomfortable clothes and went for dreary walks with uninteresting young men; for her—bed.

She had firmly made up her mind never to speak to Jim Woods again, yet the night after their parting she had glanced across the road just to see if he were there, and he was not there. She felt a little chill of disappointment. She was conscious of tears and hated herself for her weakness.

"Good riddance," she said aloud, but she did not mean it, and she could not cheat herself. She had told him to go, had said she would never speak to him again, and he had taken her at her word. All men were fools, he the greatest of any. But he had looked horrible—she shuddered at the thought of his black eye and swollen lip.

So the week passed and he came no more, and every evening she glanced across the road and, seeing no one

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there, she bit her lips a little and forced the tears back, the tears that would come.

It would have been nice to have had him for a friend. She had no friends, she spoke to no one except Gert Rawlings, and that not much.

He had come into her life and had gone out of it again. Somehow it made life just a little more lonely for her than it had been before, just a little more—if that were possible.

This morning on her way to the laundry Gert Rawlings caught her up.

"You're getting proud, ain't you, 'Nid?" she said.

"Me proud? I ain't got much to be proud about," Enid said.

"I don't know, I'd put on a bit of side if chaps got to fighting about me."

"Chaps?" the other girl asked.

"Yes, Alf—you know Alf—Alf Young, my young man, he's working in the carpenters' shed on the new building. He told me Woods—the chap's name is Jim Woods—Luke Simmonds was saying something about you, something about—well, I don't remember, I think it was about you speaking to any chap who come along, and this chap Woods—'Liar!' he says to Luke——"

'Nid gripped her small hands tightly, a tense look came into her face.

"'Dirty liar,' he says, this chap Woods," Gert Rawlings went on.

"And—and it was about me?" 'Nid whispered.

"About you all right. It seems Luke and some of 'em see that chap Woods speaking to you, and they was laughing about it. Luke, he says you was the sort of girl as 'ud speak to any man who spoke to her—though

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you ain't, 'Nid, I know that—and then this feller Woods, he goes up to Luke with clenched fists and calls him liar!" Gert paused. "Well, they fought all right!" The girl laughed. "They say that there ain't no one to stand up to Luke, only this feller did—stood up to him for ten minutes and took 'is punishment like a man, and knocked Luke out, what's more, Alf says. So you see, chaps 'as been fighting about you. Lor', there goes the blooming bell!"

Fighting—fighting about her! And she had not known. Fighting for her! She felt something swell in her breast—pride, joy, happiness. Then came grief, horror. After he had fought and bled for her she had insulted him, called him filthy and foul, and turned her back on him!

"Oh, what does he think of me?" she moaned. "What does he think of me? He done it for—for me, called that Luke a liar for me—oh!" She looked across the road to the spot where he had usually waited; he was not there. Would he ever be there again?

"'Nid Foster, you're wanted!"

It was not usual in the middle of the afternoon's work.

"Me?" 'Nid said.

"Wanted—you come with me!" Miss Henderson said.

"What's the trouble?" 'Nid asked.

"It's Miss Clare, she's come about that there petticoat, and she said she'd like to see the girl what spoiled it."

"What's she want to see me for?" 'Nid asked.

"I don't know, you'd better ask her," Miss Henderson said.

Miss Clare was in the waiting-room; she was tall and slender, beautifully dressed. She was young, not more than two or three and twenty, and she was distinctly

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and obviously very beautiful, with raven-black hair, a white colourless skin and vivid red lips. She looked at 'Nid and 'Nid looked at her; there was a suggestion of defiance in 'Nid's eyes.

Miss Clare laughed. "So you are the—the young lady who ruined my petticoat," she said.

"I'll pay for it if I did," 'Nid said.

"I am afraid you would find it expensive; do you know that was real Valenciennes?"

"I'll pay, anyhow," 'Nid said.

"But I don't want you to pay; after all, the scorched piece can be carefully taken out."

"Then why did you want to see me?"

"Merely curiosity," Miss Clare said. She laughed as she spoke. "I was curious to see the girl who washed my clothes."

"I don't wash 'em, I only iron 'em," 'Nid said.

"And scorch them," Miss Clare said.

"I suppose you've come to get me the sack," 'Nid said.

"I have come for no such thing, and I don't think I quite like your manners," Miss Clare said. "I really wanted to do something for you, I'd have liked to have helped you."

"I don't want no help."

"If you don't wish to speak to this girl any more, Miss Clare, she had better go back to her work," Miss Henderson said.

Miss Clare nodded. "You're a funny little thing. You almost made me cross, but not quite—see, I'll shake hands with you." She held out a very delicately gloved hand.

'Nid glanced at it, her cheeks burned suddenly; there was a suggestion of insult in the other woman, patronage. It seemed as if Miss Clare were suggesting that

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she was descending from a great height by holding out her hand to a common laundry girl.

"I don't think, if you don't mind, I'll shake 'ands," 'Nid said. "I—I don't shake 'ands—much." She turned and went out.

"I'm sorry, Miss Clare——" Miss Henderson began.

"What a funny little soul, and how beautiful!" Miss Clare said.

"Bea—beautiful, 'Nid Foster—her!" Miss Henderson gasped.

"My good woman, yes. Where are your eyes? Eyes, I say! Haven't you seen her eyes? They are the sort of eyes a man——" She paused. "And her mouth. She is only a child yet, wait—beautiful!" She laughed. "She is something more, she is extraordinary. She's got a face to remember, to dream about; those eyes and that mouth of hers, and—and that colouring, the expression! You're not an artist, Miss Henderson."

"Me? No; I run a laundry," Miss Henderson said. "As for beauty——" She looked at Miss Clare with frank admiration.

"I'm a woman," Miss Clare said. "But even though I am a woman I can see beauty in other women and appreciate it. I have never seen a girl with a face quite like this one's before. I tell you——" She paused and shrugged her shoulders; after all, why waste her enthusiasm on this log? And Miss Henderson was a log.

"Don't trouble any further about that skirt," she said. "It's all right, but I am glad I came. I am glad I saw that girl. She is something out of the common, and, remember what I say, beautiful!"

Miss Henderson smiled. So long as Miss Clare did not make a fuss about the skirt, that was the main thing.

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And he had fought and bled for her, and she had insulted him. 'Nid's heart swelled. Would he be there to-night, would he? He was not there; she felt a sense of sickening disappointment. No, he was not there, would never come there again. She would never see him again, and she wanted to—wanted to tell him that she was sorry, wanted to thank him. She felt a great longing to humble herself to him somehow, in some way—how, she did not know. But he was not there, and was never likely to come again. He had taken her dismissal literally.

She went home, she made herself tea, boiling the water on an oil-stove that had a peculiar smell of its own. She never disliked the smell of the oil-stove, it was so different from the smell of the laundry. It was even pleasant as a change. She cut two slices of thick bread and butter and neglected to eat them.

She would never see him again, he would never come back to her. But she was in fault, it was her duty to make amends. She was a generous little soul at heart; realising that she was in fault, she was eager to ask pardon. When she wished to atone there was no limit to her atonement, no lengths to which she would not go to prove her contrition.

If he demanded it, she would go down on her knees and grovel to him. Was it not in her defence, in her honour, that he had acquired that blackened eye, that cut lip, that puffed and swollen face?

She could not rest to-night; she did not know where he lived, had not the faintest idea, but she went out. If he did not come to see her, then she must go and seek him. She did not usually go out. Sometimes she read a little, then she went to bed. She was always glad

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to go to bed, to ease her aching legs and her burning, tired feet.

She went out. She shuddered a little as men passed her; she drew back to avoid them. She did not know which way to go, but she accepted it all as part of her atonement. Much, much rather would she have been in her own room, lying in her bed, finishing the last chapter of the book Gert Rawlings had lent her. But she had to find him.

It was curious that she did find him. He stood outside the door of a picture palace, the light full on him. He seemed to be hesitating whether to go in or not. Then she touched his arm, and he turned and looked down at her.

"I—I've been looking for you," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"To—to tell you I'm sorry—very sorry and—and ashamed."

"Why?" he said again, yet his face lighted up. The puffiness was gone, there was still a suggestion of alien colour about the eye, but the swollen lip was not noticeable.

"I—I was told—some one told me——" She hesitated, a burning flush came into her face.

"What the fight was about?"

"Yes. About me. I know how it was, you—you stood up for me, and I—I turned against you. I hate myself——" Her voice thrilled with passion. "It wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't fair, was it?" he said; "but then you didn't know."

"And I—I want you to know I am sorry and—and ashamed, and I'd do anything to prove it."

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"Anything?" he said. He stooped and peered into her face. She flinched, but faced him bravely. She nodded.

"Anything's a lot—a—a great deal." He gripped her arm; the pain almost made her wince. "Still, I'll test you," he said. "Will you—marry me—be my wife?"

She still stared at him; she felt as if the solid ground beneath her had given way suddenly, that it was only his grip on her arm that was holding her up.

Still, she had said it, and she never, never was a liar; she had said "anything."

"I am asking too much," he said. "I thought I would, but you said 'anything.'"

"And—and I mean it," she said. "Yes, I said anything. I'll marry you if you want it, I'll be your wife."

"You mean that?"

She nodded.

She knew what it meant to her—it meant that somehow all her dreams, the curious fancies that had been part of herself, must die now. Her future was no longer a mysterious, unknown quantity, a dim future full of vague possibilities. She would marry him, go and live in some small cottage; probably later she would go back to the laundry and work like Mother Melchor and the rest did. There would always be the rent to pay, then later he might take to drink—most men did. He might hurt her and knock her about. The wonderful, unreal dreams that might yet have come true must end. She had said "anything," and he had taken her at her word.

Almost unconsciously she let him draw her into the picture house; they sat side by side in the darkness.

"'Nid," he whispered, "would you tell me one thing?"

"Yes, what is it?"

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He hesitated. "I—I mean—would you——" He paused. "It's this, you don't care, you—I mean you don't love me, do you?"

"No," she said simply.

"And yet you'll marry me?"

"I said so."

"If you'd rather not——" he said.

"I said I would and I will—I said I'd do anything," she muttered passionately. "You—you thought you'd prove me, you thought I wouldn't do as I said; well, you haven't proved me. I'll marry you when you like."

Neither looked at the pictures. Now and again he muttered to her some confidence about his wages, his prospects, something the foreman had said. He discussed their future home, a cottage in a certain street he knew of.

She listened without enthusiasm. She was realising that in some way she had cut herself off from the future that might have been. She closed her eyes and saw an impossible blue sea with white specks on it. Still, she could never understand what the white specks meant. She saw an equally blue sky with a great yellow pillow of a cloud suspended in it. Not for her, never for her. Only some cottage in one of these back streets, toil, rent day, the laundry again when she was old and fat like Mother Melchor. It was all gone, the dreams; but the hunger was there still, the hunger for the vague, unknown life of which she knew nothing, would never know anything now.

He saw her home; he stood outside the door of the lodging-house where she lived; he held her thin, bony hand tightly and bent to her; he kissed her on the cheek and looked eagerly into her eyes. He prayed inwardly, though he did not know it, that that kiss might mean

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the birth of love, might awaken the soul in her—but it did not.

She went upstairs, locked the door of her room, and threw herself down on the bed. She felt too tired to undress—she ached from head to foot. She had not lighted the candle, and she lay there staring into the darkness.

“I’ve missed everything,” she said, “everything! I don’t know what I’ve done or what I’ve missed. Only it seems as if there’s nothing left now—nothing.” She flung out her hands with a sharp cry of pain. It was like the cry of the girl when she had burned her bare arm with the hot iron.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW HOME

'NID rose early, as she always did. There was a weight on her mind, a sense of oppression. Something had gone wrong with her life. She was going to be married, yes, that was it.

She thought of Mrs. Melchor who worked next to her in the laundry. Mrs. Melchor was married. She was perhaps forty, and she looked sixty. She was worn and harried, life was hideous to her; so it would be with her presently. Marriage seemed to spoil everything. It was hateful to be married.

The man himself that she was going to marry played a very small part in the girl's thoughts. She hardly knew him, she did not know if she liked him. She thought not. Last night he had kissed her; she rubbed her cheek vigorously as though to rub away the taint, the remembrance of it.

Deep down in her heart was a world of romance, though she did not know it. She had read nothing worth reading, she knew nothing about handsome young princes who rescued beggar maidens and lifted them up to share their thrones. She knew nothing of this, yet the instinct was there. She felt that something ought to come into her life to change it utterly. But as it was, she would simply drift into marriage; in a little time she would become as Mrs. Melchor and the others, old, ugly,

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worn out before her time, shapeless and fat perhaps, though Heaven knew what Mrs. Melchor got fat on.

She went to the laundry and her work; the other girls said "Good-morning" to her.

"Hello, 'Nid!" Gertie Rawlings said, "what's up? You look as if you'd lost a shilling and found six-pence."

She kept her secret to herself—she was not proud of it. She expected that the other girls would laugh at her and sneer. Marry—she was very young to marry, wasn't she?. She knew nothing about marriage. Her mother had been dead years; she had lived alone without companions of her own age. She never listened to the light talk of other girls.

Marriage meant nothing to her except a kind of prison in which, pent up, she would grow old and ugly and tired to death before her time.

He was waiting for her that evening, waiting boldly. He stepped across the road and came straight to her, unmindful of the stares and the giggling of the others.

There was an air of possession about him, his honest face glowed, he walked with his head held high.

This was his girl and they were going to be married soon. Only last night he had studied his Post Office Savings Bank book, and the catalogue of a furnishing business.

He would just about manage it without getting into debt. He told 'Nid about it, but she was not interested.

"I'll be getting a rise soon," he said; "and we'll manage finely, E-nid."

"Yes!" she said. "And me, I suppose I'll stay at the laundry?"

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"You? No," he said; "my wife won't have to work for her living, I'll see to that."

Not at first perhaps; but later—oh, yes, she was sure to have to come back later, they all did.

"Haven't you got nobody in the world, 'Nid?" he asked.

"Nobody," she said.

"Not an uncle nor an aunt, nor anything?"

"Nobody!"

"More have I, that I know of—there's some relations of my father somewhere, only I never seen them," he said; "and they never seen me, so we won't worry about them. I expect we'll get on without relations all right."

He took her unresisting hand and drew it through his arm; his homely face glowed with pride as he walked down the street beside her.

"How'd it be if we was to arrange to get married on your seventeenth birthday?" he asked.

"I don't mind," she said wearily. "It's all the same to me."

They went to a picture palace, but she did not enjoy it at all. He insisted on holding her hand, even when the lights were turned up. Something, she did not know what it was, prevented her from drawing it away.

"'Nid, I've seen a little house, just the place for us; it's in Pent Street," he said. "It's only six and six, and they are willing to do it all up new."

"Oh!" she said.

"What do you think about it?" he asked eagerly.

"I daresay it'll do as well as any other," she said.

"But you ought to have some say in it, 'Nid," he said.

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"I don't mind—you know best; we got to live somewhere, I suppose," she said wearily.

He met her again the next night and the next. The other girls chaffed her about it.

'Nid Foster had a young man at last. No one envied her her young man—he was homely and plain. "Not my style," they said; "and manners; he don't even take his 'at off when he sees her: look at Alf and Bert, they've got manners if you like!"

It was not until two weeks later that it leaked out that 'Nid was going to be married.

The girls accepted it as a kind of joke; Mrs. Melchor sniffed.

"A kid like 'er!" she said; "why, she ain't seventeen yet. Married—if she knew as much about it as I did!" She sniffed again—"I 'ate the sight of men, I do. I was 'appy when I was a gel; now——" She thumped her iron down on the ironing board. "I 'ate the very sight of men," she repeated. "Beer and grub and grub and beer, that's all they think of."

Gertie Rawlings questioned her.

"I s'pose you've fell in love with 'im. 'Nid, though what you see in 'im I don't know, nor does any of the others. Of course he ain't bad, and he seems quiet and sober enough; but—any'ow, there's no accounting for love."

"I don't love 'im," 'Nid said angrily, "I don't love nobody, Gert."

"Then what are you marrying 'im for?"

"I don't know," the girl said.

"But there's got to be some reason."

"Well, he asked me. I didn't treat him fair and I

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said I'd make it up and do anything he liked, so he said, 'marry me,' and I promised."

Gert laughed.

"Well, you're a rum one, you are, 'Nid," she said. "And so you're going to marry 'im just because 'e wants it and not because you do."

"That's it," 'Nid said shortly. She turned away.

"You might 'ave picked a chap with some looks and manners, any'ow," Gert called after her.

"Pick!" She had not picked at all; the man had picked her. She did not want to marry him nor any one else, but the thought never came to her to cry off, to beg Jim Woods to release her. She had promised, and instinctively she regarded her promise as sacred. Besides, she had ill-treated and misjudged him, and owed him reparation. So it must go on, of course.

And now the time was getting very short. The banns had been published in church. 'Nid had insisted on being married in church—her mother had been married in church.

"I don't hold with registry offices," she said.

Nor did he; in his heart he thought it more fitting that they should be married in church. And in a week's time they would be man and wife. He was waiting for her to-night with the light of a great eagerness in his face.

He took her hand and held it and then tucked it into his arm.

"'Nid," he said, "I got something to tell you."

"Well?"

"We'll go and 'ave a bit of tea at Menker's," he said, "round the corner; after that——" He paused.

She walked on; she was not impressed by his excitement. Outside Menker's there was a large hoarding, on

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the hoarding were advertisements. One caught her eye; it was a railway company's advertisement advertising a cheap trip to a well-known seaside place. There was a view of the place, the usual blue sky and the blue sea.

"A reg'lar Rickett's blue," she thought as she stared at it. There was a suggestion of landscape in brilliant yellows, browns and greens. She stood staring at it—it held her eyes. There was a suggestion of glorious sunshine about it, crude as it was. She felt something move within her, a desire, yearning, hunger for something—something that she had repressed for so long now.

"Come on, 'Nid," he said; "what are you staring at?"

"What's them white spots they always put on the sea?" she asked.

"That?" he said—he looked at the pictures. "Oh, that's foam, I s'pose."

"Foam," she said; "you mean like suds?"

He nodded. "Something like that; it's when the waves break the top turns white like suds."

"I often wondered," she said. She turned into the shop, but took one glance back at the picture.

Sea, sunshine, colour—a riot of colour. She was panting a little as if she had run far; that was what she wanted—sea and sunshine and colour, the breath of flowers, brightness, glitter, some other life, a life that she had never known. And yet, curiously enough, she had some vague sense of remembering that other life.

She had never seen the sea in her life, yet she felt that she knew what it was like.

"Jim," she said, "if you was to dip a cup into the sea and fetch out some water, would it look blue inside the cup, just like the blue we puts the clothes in?"

He laughed. "No, it wouldn't. It isn't naturally blue

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at all, it's just clear like water in that bottle; it's the blue sky as makes the sea look blue—reflection——” He paused. “’Nid, I’ve got something to show you to-night——”

“What’s that?” She spoke without curiosity.

“It’s that little home; I took it and it’s been done up. I got the furniture all ready; rent starts from to-day: it’s mine—ours now.”

She did not feel elated. She knew Pent Street—she had to pass through Pent Street twice every day of her life. It was a mean, narrow, unlovely thoroughfare like most other streets in the neighbourhood.

“I want you to come and see it this evenin’, ’Nid,” he said. “It’s all ready, just as it’ll look on our wedding-day when I take you home.”

“I’ll come!” she said.

She paid for her own tea—on that she always insisted. Whenever she went with him to a picture palace or had a meal, as now, she paid for herself. He remonstrated at first and then gave way. He had asked one of the men at the carpenter’s shed how he managed when he went out with his girl.

“Do you pay, or does she?” he asked.

“Her pay!”—the man laughed. “I’d like to see her; not she! No girl ever pays for herself when a chap takes her out.”

But ’Nid did—’Nid was different; somehow he felt pleased to think that ’Nid was different from other girls.

Coming out ’Nid took another long, lingering glance at the railway poster.

“I often wondered what them white marks were,” she muttered; “now I know—it’s suds.”

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It was not far to Pent Street; they walked quickly because he was eager and enthusiastic.

He felt proud of the new home—it represented the spending of some years of savings. He was glad to think that he never drank and only smoked a very little. If he had drunk and smoked a great deal he would not have saved the money.

"This is it," he said; and his voice shook with pride.

The girl looked up at the house; there was not much of it to look at—a door newly painted brilliant green, but with the old paint, blistered and scarred, left under. There was one window to the right of the door, two windows above—that was all.

He opened the door with his key and they went in.

The door opened into a sitting-room—a box of a room. He had purchased what was catalogued as a "dining-room suite in saddlebag." It already looked a little dusty; there were four small chairs, two armchairs and a couch. They more than filled the room—to get round the table one had to edge sideways.

Two of the chairs were already showing signs of collapse, their back legs unsteady. The man who had moved the things had told Jim in confidence how the rolls on the arms of the armchairs and the back of the couch were made.

"You take empty ginger beer bottles," he said, "and roll them round with rags—that's the foundation. The rest of it's mostly seaweed."

He looked at her now, eagerly and expectantly. He half expected her to break out into little cries of rapture. But she did not.

"It looks too full, somehow, don't it? There's too many things." Which showed her good sense.

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"It'll be all right when you get used to it, 'Nid; besides, we could shove some of the chairs into the back room as it won't be wanted."

They went into the kitchen, and she nodded.

"It's all right," she said unenthusiastically. "Only them tin saucepans won't last long; you ought to have got iron."

"I didn't know," he said heavily. "I daresay we'll pick up an iron saucepan or two."

He led the way up the narrow stairs to the bedroom.

'Nid looked about her. The room faced the street; the painted chest of drawers and the washstand were neat and clean. There was a rug beside the bed on the floor; the bed itself looked large, she thought—she said so.

"But—it's the right size," he said; "I asked and——"

'Nid nodded. "What's this to be—your room or mine?" she asked.

He started, he turned red, he looked at her; her face was utterly unconscious.

"Yours, I expect," she said slowly. "The bed's so big."

Jim did not answer; he walked to the window and stood staring out into Pent Street.

A child after all, only a child, not yet seventeen! He did not look at her—he stared into Pent Street.

"It's yours," he said; "any—any old shake-down'll do for me. I thought of fitting up that there empty back room—it'll do for me all right, 'Nid."

"Them things in my rooms belong to me," she said; "I could have 'em moved here. The back room 'ud do for me then with my own things—somehow it 'ud seem a bit 'omelike."

"Just as you like," he said briefly.

CHAPTER V.

"POOR LITTLE KID!"

THEY were married. 'Nid's eyes roamed about the church. The service seemed interminably long to her. She hardly listened to it. At one point Jim put a ring on her finger; she looked at it and twisted it about.

"Jim, that ain't gold, not real gold?" she asked him afterwards.

He shook his head. "No, the things cost so much, 'Nid. One day I'll give you a real gold one; they called this rolled gold—that's another name for brass, I s'pose. But I'll give you another one, a real gold one, one day."

"It don't matter, it don't make no difference, I suppose," she said.

Yesterday she had left the Snowflake Laundry. One day she would go back, she was sure of that. Every one went back. Mrs. Melchor and Mrs. Nichols and Mrs. Marken—they were married and they had gone back, so would she one day. Some of the girls kissed her when they said good-bye; they had never kissed her before.

Gert Rawlings hugged her tightly. "Good luck, dearie!" she said. "I daresay he's all right, even if he ain't much to look at. Very likely it's the plain ones as make the best husbands. Anyway, he's not one for the beershops. Alf told me that, and that's somethink, goodness knows."

So she had left. This morning early she had seen her goods and chattels removed to the little house in Pent

“Poor Little Kid!”

Street. She had arranged her own room. She had with her own money, her last wages, laid in a small stock of provisions—bread, butter, bacon, yellow soap, soda, matches, and a pound of steak. She was not sure but that she ought to have ordered two pounds; she understood that men ate a great deal.

And now they were married and were going home together. Jim was silent; now and again he looked at her.

“I didn’t wish you many ’appy returns of the day, ’Nid,” he said.

She laughed. “Of my birthday, or wedding-day, Jim?” she said.

“Birthday,” he said briefly.

Now he sat in the little kitchen and watched her. He too had the day off. She was cooking the steak over the oil-stove, her own; the smell of it reminded her of her rooms, her home, the only one she had known.

Watching her, he began to find time hanging heavily on his hands; the long, long afternoon and evening lay before them. He almost wished himself back in the carpenters’ shop. The girl was thinking of the work at the “Snowflake.” It seemed so wonderful that she was not there, and would not be there to-morrow, nor the next day, nor the next—wonderful.

’Nid made gravy—she poured some water into the frying-pan in which the steak had been cooked and let it frizzle on the stove, then she poured some over his share and some over her own.

“You’re a cook; I never see that trick before,” he said; “you are cleverer than I thought, ’Nid—in some things,” he added slowly.

They both tried to spin out the meal as much as possi-

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ble. They wondered what they should do when it was over. It was barely half-past one yet.

They could not make it last longer than ten minutes past two, even though he broke up bread in small pieces and sopped his gravy with it and lingered over the operation. 'Nid got up and put a kettle on to boil on the oil-stove.

"For washing up," she said.

"Mind me smoking, 'Nid?" he asked.

She shook her head. "All the same if I did," she said; "only I don't."

"I don't smoke in the daytime as a rule, only to-day's different." He sat and smoked his pipe.

Half-past two—what a day! Would it never end? He fidgeted a little.

"I—I've been thinking if I popped out—there's some of my tools I might get and bring back and put on the oilstone," he said. "It 'ud be something to do."

"All right," she said; she did not turn her head as she washed up in the sink.

Jim drew a long sigh of relief as he stepped out into Pent Street.

"Clever and pretty," he muttered; "knows a deal, wonderful what she knows—and—and don't know."

He walked to the carpenters' shed and stood looking at the others working.

One man looked up. "Hello, Woods!" he said. "I see you with a bit of a girl this morning; who's she?"

"Oh, her——" Jim said. He paused.

"Your girl, or 'ave you adopted 'er or what?" the other man asked.

Jim smiled slowly. "That's it, I fancy, ad-opted her," he said.

"Looks about fifteen," the man said.

"Poor Little Kid!"

"Seventeen to-day—it's 'er birthday."

"Oh, I s'pose you was taking her out to give 'er a treat. This bit o' timber's got a shake in it from end to end," he added.

Jim hung about the shed till nearly five, then he went home. The long evening was before them—at any rate there were the picture palaces, but that would be an expense if they had to go there every night; still to-night was their wedding-day.

She had tea ready; it looked comfortable and cosy—he began to doubt about the picture palace after all. But after tea she turned to the sink. "That's the worst of meals, there's always washing up!" she said. She yawned a little wearily.

"How about the pictures, 'Nid?" he asked.

"If you like——"

They went out; he wanted her to take his arm, but she would not.

"Just as if I can't walk alone," she said.

"Anyway, I can pay for you now," he said with a note of triumph in his voice.

"I suppose so," the girl said. "I shan't be earning nothing now."

The little house looked dark and rather lonely, when they got back. Jim lighted the lamp.

"Tired?" he asked.

She nodded. "Dead tired; it's been a long day, I think I'll get off." She paused. "Good-night, Jim."

He got up and went to her. "Good-night, 'Nid," he said. "Ain't you going to kiss me?"

"I s'pose so," she said wearily. She held up her face; he kissed her cheek.

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"Good-night, Kid," he said. "That's what I think I'll call you in future—Kid."

She laughed. "Good-night, Jim."

He went back and sat down on the new Windsor chair and stared at the lighted lamp, but he did not notice that the wick was turned too high and that the smoke was making a black patch on the ceiling.

"Funny thing, life," he muttered.

"I don't know that Mason weren't right—a-dopted, that's the word," he laughed softly. "Poor little kid!" he said.

He sat there for an hour, then rose. He turned out the lamp and went upstairs; outside her door he paused and listened. The door was ajar; he could hear her regular, soft breathing—she was fast asleep. He went into his own room.

"Dead tired," he muttered. "And it's latish. I've got to be at the works at six in the morning."

CHAPTER VI

THE PASSING OF SIR HAROLD

THE doctor's face was very grave as he came into the morning-room; the girl rose eagerly to greet him. He shook his head.

"I am afraid, Miss Clare, there is absolutely no hope, the desire to live is gone. It is the shock, the terrible shock. Think of it, the two—both of them so young, so full of life, so promising, the beginning and the ending of all things to him. The awful shock of it—one can understand, poor old fellow—poor old man——" He paused.

"Then you do not think that Sir Harold can possibly live?" the girl asked.

"He will not live; he will die because he wishes to die. He was never a strong man; he lived in his children. They have both been taken from him—the blow is more than he can bear. He wishes to die—he told me so with his own lips—and he will."

The girl moved across the pleasant, old-fashioned room; she looked out into a garden, a garden gorgeous with flowers. Standing there in the window embrasure she could see the old clipped yew walk that was one of the glories of Bevanwood. The Sussex guide book had it that this clipped yew walk at Bevanwood was one of the finest and most complete in existence.

The same guide book also had it that "Bevanwood, the

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seat of Sir Harold Bevanwood, Bart., was commenced in the reign of Mary by Sir Walter Bevanwood, who was responsible for the main building and the west wing. The east wing, however, was completed by Sir Ambrose Bevanwood in the reign of James the First. Visitors are admitted on certain days on presentation of their cards, and particular attention is drawn to the admirable examples of Sir Peter Lely and Van Dyck in the long corridor, the Hogarths, Gainsboroughs, Raeburns and Reynolds in the picture gallery in the west wing, also the fine Dutch collection, including a superb Matsys, believed to be the best example of this master, equalling even that at present in Windsor Castle; this and others are to be seen in the large dining-hall."

There was much other interesting information in the guide. The girl stared out across the garden; the doctor was drawing his gloves on slowly, gazing at her slender back with a curious smile on his face.

"Oh, there's Geoffrey!" she said suddenly.

"Your brother?"

"Yes, I sent him a wire last night; he has lost no time in coming—I told him about poor Hugh and Ralph, and—and uncle—poor uncle, it is a blow to us all."

"Of course." The doctor paused. "You call Sir Harold uncle, but——"

"No, he is not our uncle really; we are distantly related, very distantly, I believe. Yet it seems that after all we are now the nearest, practically the only relatives he had."

"Then the young gentleman coming up the drive at this moment will in all probability be master of these broad acres ere long?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes." A flush came into her cheeks.

The Passing of Sir Harold

"It must be so. The property is all strictly entailed; I don't think there is another living relative excepting Geoffrey and myself."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Clare."

She started and turned suddenly. A man stood in the doorway, thin, dapper, clad in black, the very type of the legal practitioner.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you and for, I am afraid, dashing your hopes a little—possibly I may be wrong, but you must not forget that there was James Bevanwood, James Curtis Bevanwood, your uncle's younger brother——"

"He is dead many years——"

Mr. Aswell nodded. "Possibly, possibly. Yet he may have married and left an heir; that we must discover. As you say, the estates are strictly entailed and——"

There was a tap on the door, a nurse stood there. She beckoned anxiously to the doctor, he turned and went out of the room.

"I was saying," Mr. Aswell said, "we must satisfy ourselves that James Curtis Bevanwood left no direct heir; if not, then, of course——" Again he was interrupted, this time by a young man, a very good-looking young man. He was tall, slender, exquisitely dressed, a young man with fair curling hair that he wore a shade too long. He also wore a large silk bow for a tie in the manner of the Quartier Latin. His hands were beautifully soft, white and delicate. His voice matched his hands exactly, as did his eyes, wonderful blue eyes for a man.

"I had your wire, Sheila," he said. "I came at once——" He spoke softly, in a dreamy voice. "Poor uncle, poor Hugh, poor Ralph! How truly shocking!"

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The keen little lawyer looked at him; there was a lack of warmth, of sincerity about the young man, and his hard eyes took it in.

"It was thoughtful of you to wire me, Sheila; of course I came at once. I even put Lady Alice off. The sitting was to have been this morning——" He sighed. "Death," he said; "it is very terrible." His eyes wandered round the room. They seemed to be taking in and appraising every article it held. There was that about him which said—"This and all else will soon be mine, but for decency's sake I must not exult openly."

And the little lawyer, keen eyed as a ferret, watched him and understood. Yes, he took it all in.

"The—the news was so sudden, so terribly unexpected, such a shock," Miss Clare said.

"A feahful blow——" he said, "feah-ful." For which the lawyer hated him.

"And how—how is the poor old fellow?" Geoffrey Clare asked.

The door opened, the doctor had come in. He glanced at the newcomer.

"You were asking," he said, "how my patient is. Miss Clare—it is my melancholy duty to tell you and this gentleman, your brother, that Sir Harold Bevanwood has passed away."

CHAPTER VII

"THE THING OF HER DREAMS"

SIX weeks had made a wonderful difference. Miss Henderson, meeting Enid in the street one day, stared at her with almost unbelieving eyes. Into Miss Henderson's somewhat harassed mind there came back Miss Clare's words—"I tell you, that girl is beautiful!" And Miss Henderson had not believed her.

Yet, Enid was not beautiful even now, in Miss Henderson's estimation. To be thoroughly and entirely beautiful Miss Henderson decided that fair, curling, golden hair and very large blue eyes were absolute essentials. 'Nid had neither.

"Anyhow, she's uncommon looking and strange," she said. "Queer looking I call her, with her funny looking eyes."

She stopped and spoke to 'Nid, she even unbent to shake hands.

"I hope you're getting along well and you're happy," she said.

"I'm getting on all right," 'Nid said. As to being happy she did not know. If having little or nothing to do and having plenty to eat constituted happiness, then she was happy.

But her mind was groping for something else, something different, something that was not merely food and idleness.

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But there had been one vivid splash of the purest happiness in 'Nid's life. Two Sundays ago Jim had taken her to the sea on a day's trip. She had seen the sea, had stood staring with great, wide, wondering eyes at the things she had dreamed so often and so much about.

It was not in the least like the pictures she had seen on the hoardings. It was a grey day with a chill wind blowing; the sea had looked a greenish, greyish brown rather than blue. But it satisfied her, more than satisfied her.

They had left London at six in the morning, they had gone down in a railway carriage built to seat ten. There had been sixteen of them wedged in the carriage somehow. There had been other girls in the carriage beside herself. There had been much shrieking and giggling and laughing. Most of the girls had performed the journey seated on the knees of the young men.

'Nid had hated the journey, had wondered if it would never come to an end, had wished that she had not come. She felt tired and cold and hungry, and strangely sleepy; and then she saw the sea—and she forgot everything. She was stricken dumb. She stood shivering a little, but it was not the touch of the cold wind. It was something else, dim memories that could not be memories after all, because in all her life she had never seen the sea. In all her life, yes, that was it. But was this one life all—everything?

With these two eyes of hers she was looking on the sea for the first time and yet it seemed in no way strange to her. It was like the face of an old friend—a friend dimly, very, very dimly remembered.

It was not in the least like those highly coloured posters, those which she called "Rikitt's Blue" posters. It

“The Thing of Her Dreams”

was different, and because it was different it satisfied her.

She scarcely spoke a word the day long; she walked along the edge of the sea lost in dreams. The wind brought the colour into her cheeks, brought a new glorious light into her eyes. It caught her hair and tore it free and Jim looked at her and wondered. This was a new 'Nid, a creature he did not know.

He spoke to her and she did not seem to hear, for she never answered him. For him it was rather a disappointing day. She refused to go on to the pier, she refused to take a trip on the cliff railway, even she refused to go to a shop in a little side street and partake of sausages and mashed with vast quantities of onions. And his soul yearned for them, for he was a man with a big and a healthy appetite.

“You—you go,” she said, “and leave me 'ere. I'll stay 'ere and just watch the sea, Jim.”

But he was too loyal to go, so he sat beside her and wondered what on earth she could see to admire in that grey, ugly-looking sea. Besides it was cold. He would not have come if he had not thought that the sun would be shining, and he was hungry and just a little out of temper.

But his lack of temper was lost on her. He might not have existed so far as she was concerned.

Beset by ravening hunger, he grew sullen at last.

“Any'ow,” he said, “I s'pose you'll come and 'ave some tea? I ain't eat nothing since five this morning, and I'm fair faint for want of food, I am.”

“You—you go, I wish you would go. I'm not hungry, I don't want nothink,” she said. “I want you to go, any'ow; you'll find me 'ere when you come back.”

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And because he was hungry he went, and when he came back with a paper bag of buns for her in his hands, he found her in the exact spot, almost the exact position in which he had left her.

"I don't want 'em, I don't want nothink," she said. "I'm not 'ungry. I don't want nothink, but just to—to look."

He was thankful when the day was over. He was tired, out of sorts, grumpy. But, looking at her in the stuffy railway carriage, he saw that same strange light still dwelt in her eyes, that rapt look, that far-away look of one who sees not the sordid reality about her, but is looking away—away into some dim, misty past, a past that has never been—in this life at any rate.

And he, with his limited vocabulary and his restricted means of expressing himself, had one word only to describe that look—"barmy," he thought. "The sea's driven her barmy."

Perhaps she had not uttered fifty words during the entire day. She scarcely broke silence during the long, tedious and uncomfortable journey back to town.

But she suffered no discomfort, she did not hate the journey as she had hated it coming down. She could still see it, the grey sea, with the flashes of distant white foam, the low flying grey banks of clouds, white plumaged gulls skimming the water.

She saw it in her dreams that night and during many nights to come. It was from that day that the strange, subtle change came over 'Nid. That queer, bright, dreamy look in her eyes troubled Jim. He tried to question her gently about her forebears.

"'Ow about your mother—she was all right, I s'pose, 'Nid?"

"The Thing of Her Dreams"

"Yes, she was all right."

"I—I mean," he stammered. "She was the same as others, I s'pose, not—odd like?"

"Odd like?" She lifted bright eyes to his for a moment. "My mother was dear and good and sweet to me. I loved 'er; she was kind and loving and gentle. I don't remember 'er none too clear, only I remember she 'ad a sweet, soft voice, that's all."

"And your father?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember nothing about him; he must 'a died or something," she said. "Jim," she said suddenly, "I wish I 'ad learned a bit more at school. I didn't learn much and I s'pose it's too late—it's gone by, the time for me to learn anythink."

"I s'pose so," he said.

He sat here smoking his pipe and studying her. He, too, living with her as he did, seeing her every day, yet saw the change in her. The great change seemed to have come from that day when they went to the sea.

"Queer eyes," he thought to himself. Pretty eyes, too. He always thought them pretty. It was her eyes that had attracted him first, there had been a suggestion of sadness in them that appealed. Now the sadness was gone, but there was a curious longing, a kind of hunger in them that he did not understand.

And the little thin face was less thin, the cheeks less hollow; they were filling out very, very slowly, still they were filling out. The face was becoming oval, the complexion had always been wonderfully clear, yet inclined to sallowness. The sallowness was going, sometimes there was the faintest tinge of colour in her cheeks and then—then she was suddenly beautiful.

Jim recognised it in a disturbed kind of way. He also

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recognised another fact that made him uneasy. He knew now that he was only really happy when he could see her. He knew that of nights when his work was done he hurried home as he had never hurried in his life before, knew that his heart was beating with strange, sledge-hammerlike blows, and that he was hungry, hungry for the sight of her.

He loved her, not with a sudden, wild, passionate, desiring love, but with a great love that had come to him little by little, that would abide and live with him to the end of all things.

He had never told them at the worksheds that he was married. Sometimes they chaffed him about the "Kid." It had become known in a vague manner that Jim Woods had picked up with some kid of a girl and had practically adopted her. The other men laughed—it was just the queer sort of thing a rum chap like Jim Woods would do. They saw them together sometimes, Jim and his wife—"Jim and his kid" they called them. They went to picture palaces fairly regularly; they had been seen entering the same house when the shows were over. It got about that the girl was the daughter of Jim's landlady and he let it go at that.

It took but little, very little work to keep the tiny house in order. That she did keep it in order was beyond question—the place was like a new pin. When Jim came home every night there was always a meal excellently cooked for him, a bright fire, a clean tablecloth. No man could have been better served.

And she was economical, too. He found out that it cost but little, if any more, to be running this "show" of his own than the expense of living as a single man in apartments, and the comfort—there was no comparison.

“The Thing of Her Dreams”

And besides, there was the Kid for him to stare at and occasionally speak to during the evenings. But time hung heavily on 'Nid's hands and for a time she almost missed the Snowflake.

And then time hung heavily on her hands no longer—Mrs. Crutchett's lodger made all the difference in the world to her.

Mrs. Crutchett was the woman next door and her lodger was Miss Simmons, a decayed gentlewoman who had once been a school teacher. 'Nid had attracted her from the commencement. The girl was “unusual.” Presently Miss Simmons discovered that the girl had a great hunger for knowledge and she, Miss Simmons, had an equal hunger for human companionship other than that of Mrs. Crutchett, whose conversation was limited and inclined to be wearisome by reason of constant repetition.

“What I'm to do I don't know, with the rent falling due Friday and that there 'Nosey Parker' coming round to collect, and the price of things is getting terrible. Cabbages, f'r instance, gone up; you can't get a cabbage under thruppence and nothink at that.” This was the burden of Mrs. Crutchett's song.

So Miss Simmons made up a little parcel of old and valued books and went in to see 'Nid. That was the beginning of it. Miss Simmons went every day; she and 'Nid spent hours together, the girl poring over the books or listening with rapt attention to the woman who had constituted herself her teacher—unpaid except by various cups of tea and some delicately cut bread and butter that reminded Miss Simmons of happier bygone days.

And when she was not there, her books were. The

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house never suffered; Jim's meals were as punctual and as well cooked as ever, the little place shone like a new shilling. Yet 'Nid found time for her books.

Miss Simmons had taken her speech in hand, so to speak—'Nid was improving. She rarely dropped her aitches now and did not mix her tenses in the old familiar fashion. But Jim noticed nothing.

Yes, the six weeks had made a great change in 'Nid, and so Miss Henderson, meeting her in the street, remembered Miss Clare's words: "The girl is beautiful; with those eyes of hers she could not be anything else."

"She's funny looking anyhow and odd, unusual," Miss Henderson thought. "But it ain't my idea of beauty——" And it was not.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WHEEL TURNS

HE was a little grey man, extremely well dressed. He looked out of place in Pent Street, where folks did not dress with such scrupulous care, and where the morning tub was practically unknown. Smart, dapper, grey whiskered, he stood on the step and looked at 'Nid through large, magnifying spectacles.

"This is number eight?" he said.

She nodded. She wondered; it could not be the rent because the rent was paid yesterday, and she owed nothing, not a penny. Perhaps she was the only person in the street who could have received a strange visitor in this manner unmoved and undismayed by thoughts of possible County Court summonses.

"The—the name, I understand, is——" He hesitated.

"Woods," she said, "Woods!"

He looked disappointed, bitterly disappointed.

"Then—then I have been misinformed. I am very sorry, I understood that the name was Bevanwood."

"So it is!"

His face lighted up again. "I understood you to say——"

"It's Bevanwood, only he calls hisself—himself I mean—Woods, it's shorter and saves trouble."

"Oh," he said. "Then it is Bevanwood, your—your father, I suppose? And yet—it—no——" He paused.

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"My husband."

"But you look very young."

"I'm turned seventeen," she said. "I'll be eighteen come June."

"And—really your husband's name is Bevanwood?"

"Yes!"

"Might I come inside?"

Nid hesitated; she had no liking for strangers. But he was old, he looked respectable and harmless. She opened the door a little wider.

"Will you tell me your husband's complete name?" he said.

She nodded. "James Curtis Bevanwood," she said quietly.

"Oh, then it is so. I felt sure! Why did he not answer any of my advertisements?"

"He didn't see 'em, I expect. What was—were—they in, the evening paper?"

"No, of course, the morning dailies and the weekly——"

"We never get them; Jim brings home the evening paper and that's all."

"But his friends?"

"Jim's got no friends, and besides, those who know him only know him as Jim Woods."

"I begin to understand. Did your husband ever tell you that he came of—of a good family?"

She shook her head. "He said something once about relations he wasn't good enough to know."

"No, perhaps so. But—but this alters it; the wheel turns——" he paused.

She did not understand him in the least.

"Tell me where I may find your husband."

The Wheel Turns

"Down at the sheds on the building at the corner of Hyde Street."

"I will go and look for him."

"Remember," she called after him; "ask for Jim Woods; that other name they don't know nothing—don't know anything of."

He nodded and walked briskly away down the street.

"What's the matter now?" 'Nid wondered. Then she went back to her book—Tennyson of all things. There was much that she could not follow, yet much that she did understand. With her book she forgot other things and her life seemed to stretch out and expand for her. Dreams, ideas, that had been vague and thin, misty like a fog, became suddenly real. Engrossed in her books she heard nothing, knew nothing.

Ordinary, everyday life passed by and left her untouched. The fishmonger might go bawling down Pent Street that fresh herrings were to be bought as cheaply as three for sixpence, but it did not move her. Though fresh herrings at three for sixpence would have made a nourishing and satisfactory meal for Jim and her—two for Jim and one for herself.

That night Jim came home with a queer look on his face.

"Kid," he said; "Kid." He paused.

'Nid looked at him. "Nothink—nothing, I mean—wrong?"

"I don't know," he said heavily. "It's all rum and strange, I can't get over it. You—you sent a little badger-'aired chap down to the sheds after me."

She nodded.

Jim sat down heavily; he let his big, toil-worn hands rest on the white tablecloth.

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"It's a rum go," he said; "a blooming rum go. I don't know as I 'alf like it, Kid."

"You don't owe nothing, Jim, do you?" she said. "Owe him—anything, I mean?"

He shook his head. He could never understand why 'Nid was always correcting herself. In fact, he did not know that it was correction at all, it seemed merely repetition to him.

"Anyhow, it's a rum go," he said. He shook his head. "It sort of upsets everything." He looked round the bright little kitchen with loving eyes. "I'd 'ate leaving——" he muttered.

'Nid was dishing up the meal, a big pork chop for Jim, for herself a rasher of bacon. Jim loved pork chops. To-night they had lost their fascination for him. He sat toying with it and frowning at his thoughts.

"A rum go, Kid," he said.

"What is?" she asked.

"Oh, it don't matter pertickler, it mayn't come off. That chap, that little badger-'aired chap, 'im with the whiskers—wanted to know a deal about me, where I was born and 'ow and why and 'oo my father was, and so on, setra, setra. And I told 'im and 'e made notes and said I'd 'ear a bit more in a day or two; and then he shook hands, he did——" Jim looked down at his own hands as though he could scarcely even now believe it.

"Said as 'ow I should 'ear of somethink greatly to my advantage, he did."

But 'Nid had her nose in Tennyson again and Jim's talking was wasted on the empty air.

And that night, seated by the kitchen fire, smoking his pipe with his hands thrust moodily into his pockets,

The Wheel Turns

Jim talked and muttered and looked about the warm, comfortable little kitchen.

"I don't 'arf like it, I don't," he muttered. "It'll be a sort of upsetting of things. Any'ow, it mayn't be right." He drew a long breath as though of relief. But 'Nid, with her mind dazed by Tennyson, was not listening.

She rose presently; it was ten—at ten she always went to bed, unless they went to a picture show.

"Good-night, Jim," she said. She nodded to him and turned towards the little staircase that opened out of the kitchen through a doorway that looked as if it belonged to a cupboard.

"Good-night, Kid," he said. "Kid——" He paused, he rose to his feet. "Come 'ere."

She came back wonderingly and utterly fearless to him.

"Kid, I'd like you to kiss me to-night. I feel a bit down, a bit off some'ow, a bit lonely like, Kid. Would you?"

Her cheeks coloured and her eyes were bright as stars.

"I don't mind, Jim," she said. She stood on the tips of her little toes. She meant to kiss him on the cheek, the usual kiss that she gave him, usual, though few and far between. Then suddenly his strong arms went round her, a great hunger had come to him; he crushed her to his breast, he kissed her on the lips, the eyes, even the nose. He kissed her a dozen times and then suddenly released her.

"Good—night—Kid," he said.

Panting a little, she stood staring at him. Her cheeks were red, her eyes angry and yet not quite angry. But

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she did not say good-night. She went up the stairs and banged the door after him.

And Jim hunched himself in his chair and sat staring at the fire that was burning low.

"How them chaps would laugh," he muttered. "Laugh fit to crack their sides. Let 'em laugh, fools; they—they don't understand 'er, I do. I do! One day, please God, she will wake up, she will. She's only a kid, yet one day she—— Love 'er, love 'er!" He clenched his big hands. "Love 'er! I often wonder whether any gel 'as been loved the way I love 'er. I'd lie down and let 'er trample on me with her little feet if she wanted to. Love 'er!"

CHAPTER IX

"MY LADY"

IT was three o'clock in the afternoon some days later. 'Nid had cleaned and tidied the little house from top to bottom. She would have two clear hours before her before she need commence on Jim's tea. She curled herself up on the couch in the sitting-room and opened her book eagerly, her eyes were bright and misty with anticipation, her cheeks flushed. She might have been a girl going to meet her lover from the look of her. Anticipation, joy, eagerness, they were all in her expressive little face.

It was Tennyson to-day; she read where the book had fallen open—

"She is coming, my own, my sweet,
Were it ever so airy a tread
My heart would hear her and beat
Had it lain for a century dead."

She closed her eyes and repeated the words to herself. They seemed to touch her. How he must have loved her, that man—his own, his sweet. Would lips ever say such words to her, would—

The door had opened, 'Nid sprang up. It was the little grey-haired, whiskered man and Jim—Jim at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Something was decidedly wrong. She had only to look

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at Jim's face to realise that everything was wrong. He looked sullen, miserable, wretchedly unhappy, almost shamefaced.

"He's been doing something," she thought. "And it's found out."

"'Nid," he said, or rather groaned. "'Nid, it—it's all up."

She had once read a story in which the villain had declared that it was "all up" when the "'tecs" had laid their hands on him. It made certainty absolutely certain. Jim had done some wrong and had been found out. This grey-haired man was probably some famous detective in disguise.

She looked at him, expecting him suddenly to tear off his whiskers and remove his wig and stand revealed before her. Probably he would say, "Ha, ha, the game is up!"

But he did nothing of the kind. He only beamed on her very kindly and then stood waiting as for Jim to go on. But Jim did not.

"Well?" 'Nid said. Her voice was sad, it had a strangled sound in it. She saw herself going back to the Snowflake Laundry, to-morrow probably. The girls would question her, and then it would come out. Her husband had been arrested. He was a forger or a burglar, possibly a murderer—no, not Jim. He would not hurt a living thing, but it might have been an accident.

"Well?" she said. "What—what is it? What have you been doing?"

Jim opened his mouth and closed it again; he turned to the little grey man.

"Mister, you—you tell her, blowed if I can," he said. "I can't." He looked round the little sitting-room, the

“My Lady”

“parlour” as he called it. His eyes were watery. He had been so fond of it, so proud of it, this little home he had bought with his own earnings. There had not been a happier man——

“Tell ’er,” he whispered. “I can’t.”

And then the little man came forward and held out a hand to ’Nid.

“Lady Bevanwood,” he said, “permit me to offer you my most sincere and hearty congratulations.”

And Lady Bevanwood stood staring at him as at an amiable madman.

“It has been truly said,” Mr. Aswell proceeded, “that every cloud has a silver lining, and indeed, in this case, it seems so. The tragedy that robbed the world of those two bright young lives, I allude to Hugh and Ralph Bevanwood, a blow that killed their father—ahem,” he paused. He realised that the girl he was speaking to was staring at him with wondering eyes which proclaimed the fact that she knew absolutely nothing of what he was talking about.

He turned to Jim—Jim sullen and despondent, unhappy obviously. “Do—do I understand, Sir James,” he said sharply, “that—that you have told your young wife absolutely nothing?”

“I ain’t told her a thing,” Jim groaned. “I—I ’oped it wouldn’t come off, so—so I didn’t want to start making a song about it. But—Mr. Aswell——” He hesitated, he looked at ’Nid.

Mr. Aswell turned to ’Nid again.

“Lady Bevanwood, I have to inform you that owing to the tragic death of Mr. Hugh and Mr. Ralph Bevanwood, followed almost immediately by the death of their father, Sir Harold Bevanwood, your husband, James

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Curtis Bevanwood, son of James Curtis Bevanwood—now becomes tenth Baronet, Sir James Curtis Bevanwood, of Bevanwood, in Sussex.” He paused. “Bevanwood is one of the most charming and historical mansions in that delightful county. Your husband, as next-of-kin, succeeds to the property, which is, of course, entailed, with a rent roll of some eighteen thousand a year.”

The girl looked at him with dazed eyes; slowly she turned her head and looked at Jim. He was staring out of the window into Pent Street.

Tenth Baronet—he did not look it, with a black smudge on his cheek and glowering discontent in his eyes—eighteen thousand a year.

“Jim!” she said.

There had been a coolness, an estrangement between them since the night three nights ago when he had kissed her and crushed her in his arms. Since then she had been cold, a little bitter towards him. Now, seeing the trouble in his face, her heart went out in pity to him. She went to him and touched him on the arm.

Mr. Aswell passed his hand across his brow, he felt and looked hopelessly astonished. He had anticipated a scene of wild joy, of unbounded delight. He looked at the man, sullen and discontented, the girl apparently forgetful of everything but of sudden pity for the man who had unexpectedly come into a title and a great estate. He saw her touch his arm, saw the man turn and grip her hand almost savagely.

“And we,” he said, “we been so happy here, Kid, so happy here in this little place. Some’ow I ’ate——” He paused. “I s’pose it’ll be all right when one gets used to it, only I—I ’ate change, always did ’ate change.”

Mr. Aswell was bringing a fat pocket-book out.

“My Lady”

“Ahem!” he said. “In case—it struck me——” He paused. “Sir James, you will, no doubt, have some use for immediate ready money—necessary things, you know, clothes—ahem—a fit appearance, first impressions——” He paused again. “So I drew a couple of hundred this morning and I——” He laid the notes on the table, but they were not listening to him. ’Nid had her hand on Jim’s arm.

“I’ll try,” she whispered. “Jim, I’ll try to—to make your other home just as happy as this one’s been. I’ll work, dear, for—for you just the same.”

He turned on her suddenly, he caught her hand and held it in a grip that hurt, then he lifted it to his lips.

“So long’s I got you,” he whispered. “So long’s I got you, that—that’s all I care about, that’s all I want in this world, Kid.”

CHAPTER X

THE HOME-COMING

A COMMON working man!" "A bricklayer, I understand. He will, no doubt, appreciate the exquisite herringbone brickwork of the west front."

"Geoffrey, don't joke, it is all too horrible. Why—why did that wretched James Curtis Bevanwood marry? But for that you—we would—there is always—always a but—always something to upset things. Think of it. We might have been rich, this place might have been ours. I looked on it as ours when I heard of the death——"

"Curse the luck! Curse the man and his red-cheeked servant-girl wife!" Geoffrey Clare said. He said it with intentness and with all his heart. It was not usually that he roused himself to a sufficient extent to curse any one.

"Oh, curse them both with all my heart, the low, common, vulgar wretches," she said. "And to think that they are coming. We owe this to that interfering old beast Aswell. He always hated you."

"I hated him," Geoffrey Clare said. "A horrible little lawyer, ugh!" He looked down at the beautifully kept nails of his beautifully kept hands. His fingers were long and delicate, his hands soft and pliable, as devoid of muscle and strength as a woman's. But he was proud of them; they were, he told himself, the hands of a true artist.

The Home-Coming

Yet, as a matter of fact, he was a very bad artist. He might have nice hands and wear low collars and long, flowing ribbon neckties and velvet coats, and wear his hair a great deal too long to be pleasant, but it did not make an artist of him.

"Have you thought of the future?" his sister asked.

"I hate to think of the future."

"Do you realise that we have practically nothing; we have three hundred a year between us."

"I have my art——"

She sneered. "You never earned a penny yet, and never will. Now Sir Harold is dead the allowance he made you stops. Have you thought of that?"

"The bricklayer fellow may——"

"I hate the idea of your taking anything from him," she said.

"My dear," he said softly, "I like the idea of taking anything I can get. If the bricklayer will part, then so much the better. I shall tell him that Sir Harold allowed me eight hundred a year——"

"He only allowed you four——"

"I know; he will probably suggest four, being half."

"Oh, I hate it!" she said. "To stoop, to lower one's self. We are well-born and gentlefolks, to lower ourselves to such people as these—a bricklayer and his servant-girl wife."

They were in the drawing-room, the brother and sister. On a little table close by her hand lay an open telegram; it was signed "Aswell." It stated: "Sir James and Lady Bevanwood leaving by three-fifteen train. Please have them met at four-fifty.—ASWELL."

And the car had now gone to meet them—the big Rolls-

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Royce that poor Hugh Bevanwood had bought and prided himself on.

The Rolls-Royce had gone to meet the bricklayer and his wife.

"Listen," Sheila said. "Listen! These two, they will be ignorant and boorish, vulgar, impossible, of course. They will, in all probability, be a pair of ignorant fools. We must do the best we can for ourselves. I hate the idea, my pride rises in revolt against it—— Was that the car? Listen."

"It is the car," he said. "Go on."

"We must do the best we can for ourselves, we must make them believe in us, need us. They will be strange, they will be a pair of very ugly, common-place fish out of water. We must make them feel the need of us, make ourselves essential to them, you understand me? We have to think and plan for ourselves. We have nothing, we must—bleed them—hideous word, but it expresses what I mean. I've no time now to choose my language; you must exert yourself to please the woman, I will please the man, do you understand me?"

He nodded. "I am to fascinate the washer-woman's daughter and you are to expend your arts on the bricklayer. It promises to be amusing."

"It will be hateful," she said. "But beggars cannot be choosers, and we are practically beggars. Hark! They are coming, I hear the car in the avenue—come!" She led the way out into the old hall, to the widely open door. She stood up on the topmost of the high flight of steps and he lounged behind her.

And the car that was bringing James Curtis Bevanwood, the younger, up the avenue and into his inheritance came on. Jim looked at the pile before him, his an-

The Home-Coming

cestral home. It came to him suddenly, a sense of pride, of the dignity of his position. He was master here now, where his father had been born, where his father's father had been born before him, where a long line of Bevanwoods had been born and ruled and died. It was his.

Something seemed to rise in his throat, he looked about him. The sun was near its setting, the trees in the wide home park were casting long shadows on the grass where deer were browsing. His—all his. He was master here. Yesterday he had been—— But yesterday was gone and with it was gone Jim Woods. He was Sir James Bevanwood now, master here.

His chest swelled suddenly under the cheap, ready-made coat, the coat that was presently to bring a look of sheer horror into the eyes of Geoffrey Clare.

“'Nid, it's a fine place, ain't it? Somethink to look at, it is, and no mistake,” he muttered.

But the girl beside him said nothing. She was looking with dilated eyes, her little breast rose and fell convulsively, her hands were tightly clenched.

Had she dreamed of something like this? Had some fairy palace formed itself of her dreams? She did not know, yet it was all strangely familiar. Perhaps she had seen a print of some such house as this in one of the old sixpenny illustrated papers, stray leaves of which sometimes found their way into the laundry.

Hers—and his—somehow the thought did not please her—his. He was out of place here. She looked at him; the sun was on his face, his face was shining. His mouth was a little open. He was not looking his best. Lost in his own thoughts, the expression of his face was somewhat foolish and vacant. She drew away a little from him.

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And then the car stopped.

Gracefully Sheila Clare descended the steps; she stretched out a white, gracious hand of welcome.

"Welcome home, Sir James," she said; "and welcome home to you, too, Lady——" She paused. "You," she said. "You? This—this is too wonderful."

She knew 'Nid at once; her thoughts flew back to the office at the Snowflake Laundry, the damaged petticoat, the sullen, defiant hand who had wrought the damage, the vociferous Miss—what was her name?—the manageress. And 'Nid knew her.

"It is quite too wonderful that we should meet again like this, isn't it?" Sheila said. "Believe me, I am very glad to see you again under such happy circumstances."

"Mr. Aswell, the lawyer, said somethink—something——" 'Nid paused, "something about a Miss Clare being 'ere—here——" She corrected herself. "Only I didn't never guess—I—I never guessed that it was you."

"It is just fate," Sheila said. "Geoffrey, my brother, Sir James, this is my brother, Lady Bevanwood, my brother Geoffrey."

He came forward slowly, he held out his hand to Jim; he turned to 'Nid and looked at her and the look in his eyes was not of disappointment. On the contrary, something of his lazy indolence was gone, there was a quick flash in those eyes of his. The girl was—unusual—artistic, he could see her temperament, it was as artistic as his own.

Those big eyes of hers and that delicate little face, almost beautiful, not quite, something lacking. What? He wondered. And his thoughts travelled quickly while he held her small, well-shaped hand in his and murmured the conventional greeting.

The Home-Coming

"It—it's a fine place," Jim said heavily. "Bigger'n I—I thought for. Never been 'ere before, though I've 'eard my father speak about it—years ago; pretty well forgot all about it, though—a man can't spend his time thinking."

"And you?" Geoffrey said. "You are not a man to waste time thinking, Sir James."

"Not me," Jim said, not understanding the sarcasm under the other's speech.

Geoffrey was watching the slim, almost too slim, narrow figure up the stairs. The girl was wonderful, unusual, interesting; the man—a boor, a lumpish boor, just what he would have expected.

"You'll like to see round the place?" Geoffrey said.

"I don't mind," Jim said.

"Perhaps you—you are wondering who I am and how my sister and I come to be here?" Geoffrey said softly.

"Me, I—I don't know as I give it a thought, it seemed just natural for you to be 'ere, some'ow. I suppose some one 'ad to be 'ere to sort of caretake, 'adn't they?" Jim said.

"I am distantly related to the late Sir Harold, more distantly—unfortunately for me—than you are. But for you, Sir James, I would be master here now, but your claim is a far better one than mine."

"Sorry if—if I——" Jim paused, he hardly knew what to say.

"Oh, we won't be enemies on that account. On the contrary, I hope we shall be friends, good friends, close friends. At first you will find it rather——"

"I've been thinking of that," Jim said. He stood there on the threshold of the big drawing-room, and a look of awe came into his face.

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His—this all his. These little tables and chairs, all gilded, these ornaments, these pictures, these hundred and one things that his brain could not take in all at once. He looked down at the deep, soft carpet, he looked at his own clumsy new boots—which would not accept polish because of their newness. Fifteen and eleven they had cost him, and he felt proud of them as he had walked out of the shop. Now, comparing them with this carpet, there seemed to be something wrong, he felt that putting those boots down on that carpet would be sacrilege.

Geoffrey saw the hesitation, his brain was keen and quick.

"We'll go and have a chat in the smoking-room. You're like me, these jimcracks don't appeal to you, eh? Yes," he went on; "the late Sir Harold was my friend. He was good to me almost as a father, he made me an allowance. Now I lose all, of course."

"Why?" Jim asked.

"Why, my benefactor is dead; he left no will, nothing; besides, all, everything is entailed. He had no power to continue, and—and my sister's allowance is gone, so—so we lose all. We go back to our poverty," he sighed.

"I don't see," Jim said. "What 'e done I suppose I can do. I don't want no one to be the poorer by me."

"You are too good," the other said softly. "Too good and too generous. But, no—why should you allow me an income, why should you despoil yourself of—of——" He paused. "Of nine hundred a year?"

"If that's what you 'ad from 'im, it'll go on. I don't want any one to be the poorer by me. I daresay there'll be plenty over and above."

Geoffrey held out his hand and grasped Jim's horny rough hand.

"I—I did not expect this, did not look for it. Sheila will try and thank you, I—I cannot."

"That's all right," Jim said. He felt the better for it. He had started right, he had done some one a good turn; it gave him more confidence in himself.

"Is this the dining-room?" he asked.

"No, only the smoking-room."

Jim nodded. "It's a tidy place," he said. He felt the same awe; he walked delicately in his fifteen-and-eleven-pennies. But he must not show it; he must appear at his ease, for was he not master here? And he must learn to live up to it all. He was Sir James. And when presently the silent butler, the deferential footmen and the placid, ancient lady in rustling black silk, Mrs. Meadows, the housekeeper, came, Jim shook them all heartily by the hand.

"Pleased to meet you and 'ope you're well," he said, and felt in his heart that he had risen to the occasion and had acted just as Sir James Bevanwood of Bevanwood should act.

CHAPTER XI

THE AWAKENING

'NID was impatient of interference; she did not want to be personally conducted through the old house and over the grounds. She wanted to see for herself, find out for herself and, most of all, be by herself.

She did not feel the same nervous awe of the servants that Jim did—she seemed to recognise them as servants. She slipped into her own place quietly and with a certain dignity, a grace that was born in her.

She made no outrageous mistakes; her only mistakes were of speech, and these she usually corrected herself. She had chosen for herself a room on the very topmost floor. It was not the room for the lady of the house—Sheila told her so, but 'Nid looked at her.

"I s'pose I can choose the room I want?"

"Of—of course," Sheila said. "But there are some much better rooms on the lower floors, besides——"

"I want the room," 'Nid said, but she did not tell Sheila why; she saw no need to tell Sheila Clare anything. She wanted that room because she could see the distant sea from its window, and the sea held her, fascinated her, the lure of the sea. She had never seen it all her life until that day trip with Jim, but it seemed part of her nature.

So she went prying and poking about the house, went on voyages of discovery, found herself in dusty, long-

forgotten attics, and within a week she knew more of the house than Sheila Clare ever would.

There was not a room that she had not entered, not a corner of the fine old mansion that she did not get to know.

At the little home in Pent Street she and Jim had been good friends. At night when he had smoked his pipe beside the fire in the kitchen, she had done a bit of sewing, and they had talked sometimes of nothing that mattered—it was not talk that satisfied her. He told her of his work, of the funny sayings of some of the men, of their doings, their troubles, and she listened politely.

Now they saw hardly anything of one another. They met at meals and a great and uncomfortable silence had fallen on Jim. The fear of speech was on him; he realised that he was not as others were. He gathered that his speech was not what the speech of a Sir James of Bevanwood should be. He studied Geoffrey Clare's indolent swagger and soft, drawling voice, and tried vainly to copy it all, making himself ridiculous for his pains.

For while the one might sprawl artistically in a deep chair and still look graceful and a gentleman, the other had only the appearance of a man in the last and most helpless state of intoxication.

"The man is impossible, horrible," Sheila Clare said to her brother. "But the girl"—she shrugged her shoulders—"I hate her, I think I always hated her, but——"

"Quaint and unusual, interesting; there's something in her, she fascinates," he said. "But she is unapproachable; my task is harder than yours. The man seems to follow you like a shadow."

She laughed. "And the girl avoids you."

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His eyes flamed suddenly. "But she shan't. I'll take her in hand. I'll tame her yet—watch and see."

And that evening as 'Nid stood in the long picture gallery, studying the pictures of bygone Bevanwoods, she became conscious that he was standing beside her.

"You are interested in these pictures, Lady Bevanwood?"

She nodded in silence. She resented him; she wanted to be left alone.

"And the house?"

"It interests me," she said.

"Doesn't it all seem strange to you?"

"No, it doesn't." There was resentment in her voice and he knew it, but continued.

"It is not strange, and yet——"

"I don't understand, I don't know nothink—anything," she said. "All I know is it isn't strange, it seems just right."

"I understand. Yet you were always—forgive me—you were never rich, you never lived in such a home as this?"

"No," she said. She would have turned away, but he pleaded with her not to. So she stayed, lest he might think her rude.

"There are some who would smile at what you say, but I know better," he said. "Somewhere in the past—the past that yet was not a part of this life, this life you are living now, you knew of something, some place like this. It was never a real place, you never lived in such a house, yet you saw it, shall we say in your dreams?"

She nodded. She wondered that he should understand; she looked at him now with new interest.

"That's it—dreams," she said. "I seen funny things,

The Awakening

many funny things in dreams. I seen the sea in my dreams and I hadn't never seen it before, only the posters on the hoardings; and then when I see the real sea, all grey and brown, and the curling waves, I knew it was the right sea—just as it should be and not like them posters—those posters, I mean—on the hoardings."

He had a smattering of the mysterious, the occult. It had interested him; he had studied theosophy without understanding it. He had never tried to understand it. He had told himself and others that he believed in re-incarnation; he was essentially shallow and lacking deep knowledge, and the pose appealed to his vanity and self-esteem. He drew on his slight knowledge now and his imagination for her benefit. And while he spoke she listened with breathless attention. She had forgotten that she had resented his attentions and his coming here. And he was secretly delighted. He had found a way past her aloofness, he knew now how to approach her.

"There was a door to which I found no key,
There was a veil past which I could not see,"

he quoted.

She held her breath. "I—I seem to understand what that means. Go on," she said. But he could not, he had forgotten the rest.

"What's it mean, what's it mean?" she breathed.

"It means——" He floundered, a little out of his depth. "It means just this——" He spoke a little lamely, a little uncertainly. "Of a sub-consciousness, a memory of things that did not belong to this life at all—things, places, people, happenings of a previous existence. This is not our first time on earth. In some past age you were

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here, not as you are now. I was here—perhaps—yes, I think that in that long ago you and I met.”

He saw it affected her.

“And—and then I knew the sea,” she said. “I was by it, I saw the sea often, perhaps I lived in a ship.”

“Quite likely, or in some fine old house like this, one on the edge of the sea.”

“Oh!” she said. “Oh, that must be it!” Her face flushed, her big eyes shone, a sudden and wonderful beauty came to her, and the man drank it in.

He realised suddenly that she was not merely quaint and interesting and unusual, she was beautiful with a strange charm. It affected him. An artist, even though a bad one, he had an appreciation of the beautiful, and she was beautiful with those great liquid eyes of hers, pools in which a great wonder, a great desire for knowledge lay. Those red, parted lips, showing the gleam of little white teeth, those almost colourless, oval cheeks. Beautiful—why, he had been blind, she was wonderful!

“You—you’ll talk to me again,” she whispered. “Tell me more; tell me about the things you’ve read, the things you know. It has all been misty and unreal to me, like dreams; and yet—yet it is true, I know—I know——” She paused. “It’s this life as is more like dreaming; there was another life behind, a life I seem sometimes to remember——”

“And in that life you and I met,” he whispered. “We met.” His eyes glowed into hers. “Perhaps we, you and I——” He paused, dared he? Yes, he dared. “Perhaps we loved—who knows?”

“Who knows?” she thought. “Who knows?”

It was Sheila who suggested that Geoffrey should teach her to ride.

The Awakening

Slender, light, graceful, it was no hardship for her to learn. She learned quickly; in a few days she could ride the big, steady old mare and sit her like a bird. And then they went for long, long rides together on the downs overlooking the sea. And the wind kissed the rare colour into her cheeks and made her eyes bright.

Her love for the sea was amazing and extraordinary, and while she watched it, he watched her. And one whose heart was very heavy and sad and lonely watched them both and felt strangely out of it all.

'Nid was his wife and yet she never seemed to give him a thought, scarcely ever threw him a word.

"Yet—yet she's only a kid, after all, she's only young," Sir James Bevanwood thought. "One day it will come right."

But meanwhile his heart was hungry for her, his eyes were wistful for her. Sometimes when he touched her little hand, grown so white and delicate of late, his blood leaped in his veins, he thrilled at the touch.

He was a big, commonplace, ugly fish out of water, but he was a pathetic and lonely fish, too. The servants sneered at him, he felt abashed in their presence. They never sneered at 'Nid. She was "My Lady," treated with respect and deference.

And in his loneliness and heart-hunger, the man was turning to the only one who seemed to take an interest in him. She was always by his side, always ready with advice and help in little difficulties. She shut herself up with him in the library and went over with him the affairs of the estate. And he thanked her gratefully, though dumbly, and longed with all his heart for the old days and the little kitchen and his pipe, and 'Nid sitting

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there by the kitchen table with her needlework in her hands.

But to 'Nid a new interest, a new joy in life had come. She had been like one groping in the dark, and then—she had found him, this man, and he had opened the doors to her, had let the light in on her darkness.

He could talk with her as Jim never could, he never laughed at her. Sometimes his eyes smiled into hers; sometimes he held her hand too long, yet she did not notice it.

"By all means," his sister said to him, "make her fall in love with you, that is all part of the idea. But, my dear Geoffrey, don't do anything so absurdly impossible as to fall in love with her. That would be too tragic and too silly. Do, please, remember that she is only a little laundry girl, even if she has big, soulful eyes and a not unpretty face."

"Not unpretty," he murmured to himself with a wry smile, for he knew that Sheila's advice had come too late. He knew that he had fallen in love with the little laundry girl, had fallen in love with the girl who sat so lightly on the big grey mare, those great eyes of hers gazing far out to sea, the cheeks tinged with colour by the whip of the wind, her hair blown about her sweet young face. How could a man help falling in love with her?

And he had come to learn by innocent, artless words she had let fall that she was an utter child at heart; that though she was married she was still but a child—that her husband, the great hulking man, was no more to her than any other man on this earth. And, knowing this, he felt a joy beyond words.

"She has never loved and I will teach her," he promised himself. "I will teach her what love really is."

CHAPTER XII

THEIR SEPARATE WAYS

SIR JAMES went on his way. When his great hulking figure came lumbering down the peaceful village street, the dogs lying sunning themselves in the dust wagged their tails instinctively.

He hardly ever passed one without giving it a pat on its dusty head. He never passed a child but that he stopped and felt in his pockets, the pockets of the new clothes from London that Sheila had insisted on, for coppers.

The children and the dogs came to know him and look for him. It was no unusual thing to see him tramping through the village with a couple of dirty faced, happy little ones on either side of him, and a dog or two lopping along at his heels.

His way, the children knew, always led to the sweet shop, and sometimes there were not two, but nearer twenty of them, and he went on first and they followed, and always with a mongrel dog or two in the procession.

And the women-folk from their doorways smiled at him and bobbed curtseys. For the man who loved their children was a man after their own heart.

Down in the village they reversed things. For the big man with his ungainly figure and shining red face they had nothing but affection and respect. They loved him, came to watch for him. His coming was a signal for shrieks of joy from the children, and it was not

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wholly cupboard love, for sometimes he would go tramping out on to the hills and half-a-dozen or so who were sturdy of leg would go and tramp it with him.

Down in the village they worshipped the man, but looked askance at the girl, his wife.

Job Clark, the village postmaster, standing at the door of his shop and staring down the white road after the little slender figure on the big-grey, closely attended, as always, by her cavalier of the flowing locks and the flowing necktie, shook his grizzled head slowly.

"'Er," he said; "'er with 'er 'orse riding and always along o' that feller Clare—who wasn't no better'n a 'anger on in the old gentleman's time—proud, too, and 'aughty like, 'olding 'er 'ead wonderful 'igh and never giving nobody as much as a look, who be she, I'd like to know? Like as not a jumped-up nobody. While Sir James be Sir James, and there be no getting away from that, whatever they servants at the 'ouse may say, the cheeky lot."

"Har! a disrespectful lot they be," said Mrs. Clark; "I 'ope they'll never feel the want of a good master."

Job wagged his head. "Anyhow, if she was my wife—which she ain't—I'd larn 'er to go 'orse riding along with another feller, that Clare with the funny tie—I'd larn her for to keep in her own place, I would, and——"

"'Oo would?" Mrs. Clark enquired.

Mr. Clark hesitated. He turned and cast a dazed eye on the distant horizon. "Looks like, wonderful like, we shall 'ave a storm before nightfall," he said.

"'Oo wouldn't let me go riding with nobody if I wanted to?" Mrs. Clark repeated.

But he had meandered away in the direction of the "Plough and Harrow."

Their Separate Ways

But the storm that Job Clark had spoken of was a reality. It came down over the downs, a grey, inky, blue-black cloud that spread over the face of the Heavens.

"We shall have to ride for it—we're in for a wetting," Geoffrey said.

Nid's little face had gone pale. "You—you don't think it's going to thunder and lightning!" she gasped.

"I am afraid it is."

She shivered. "I never couldn't abide it," she cried. She had forgotten grammar, everything else, in the terror that was coming to her.

"At—at the laundry there was a storm, a fearful, terrible one, one day; and I fainted, I—I couldn't 'elp it." She never spoke of the laundry as a rule; now nothing mattered.

She looked over her shoulder at the great inky pall spreading over the sky, and then there came a sudden flash and a distant roll of thunder.

Wild terror was in her eyes, eyes glazed with fear.

"What—what can I do? Oh, what can I do?" she moaned. "I—I'm afraid, I can't bear it. I'm afraid."

"There's the mill," he said. "We'll gain it; it'll be shelter."

He seized the mare's bridle and urged his own horse on. Another flash and then another and the girl was sobbing in terror. But the mill was reached; he lifted her down and carried her in. He dragged the horses in through the broken wall.

Outside the thunder roared and the lightning seemed to leap up from sea to sky, vivid white flashes that made the brain reel, and the crashing of the thunder was one continuous roar.

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She was in his arms, clinging to him, sobbing in her terror.

"Don't leave me, don't leave me!"

"Never, never in this world," he whispered. "Never, darling."

And she did not heed, for fear held her. She did not feel his arms about her, she clung to him for protection, and he, with the madness of this new, this strange love, the least selfish love he had ever known, bent his head and kissed her bowed head, kissed her hair and murmured words of love and endearment that she did not, could not hear.

But later, much later, when the storm was over, almost forgotten, when she was lying in her own bed safely under her husband's roof, it came back to her, much of it. And she thrilled; the blood raced hotly in her veins and flamed in her cheeks, her heart throbbed. She could feel his arms about her again, feel his kisses on her hair, hear his words, "My darling, I will never, never leave you."

His darling!

She had heard the other girls, the girls at the laundry, talk of love, had grown to hate the word. But she had never understood it. Was this love, then, this that had come into her life now? She wondered as she lay there, wakeful in the darkness, and her cheeks burned.

No one had ever kissed her hair before; once—once Jim had kissed her strangely, but she had shuddered at the time, hated him for those kisses. But this was different. Why? She wondered. Why?

And then she wondered—to-morrow, how could she face him again? How would it be when they met again in the peaceful sunlight of the morning?

CHAPTER XIII

THE HUNGER

WHAT is the end of it going to be?" Sheila asked. "I want to know; I want to know what I am working for, what the object to be gained is. For me it is tiring; you have all the amusement, all the fun. I suppose——" She paused for a moment. "I suppose you realise that there is not much fun for me in this? I feel like a bear leader. He follows me about like a tame bear, or some great, ungainly dog. He depends on me for everything. I feel almost sorry for him, even though he is rather contemptible."

She was in her own bedroom, dressed in some lacey, rather becoming dressing-gown; her brother was lounging at the open window, sending clouds of cigarette smoke out into the calm and peaceful night. The last vestige of the storm had passed away; the downpour had freshened the air, which was sweet with the scent of a thousand flowers.

"Well?" she said sharply. "This cannot go on for ever."

"I do not mean that it shall," he said. "For ever is a long time, and—well, I'm young and in love——"

"You—then you——"

"Oh, well, one may as well own it. Yes, I am in love, genuinely in love. She attracted me from the start. It's not merely that she is pretty—I don't know——" He

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paused and drew hard at his cigarette. "She's odd, quaint, unusual; she appeals to my artistic——"

"Rubbish!" his sister said sharply. "I warned you and you did not listen."

"Your warning came too late. You ask what the end is going to be; for me—only one thing—'Nid——" He paused. "I need her, life will not be complete without her."

"Rubbish!" the woman said again.

"To you, not to me. I have the artistic temperament; you, my dear Sheila—forgive me for saying it—you are entirely mercenary."

"Sensible," she said. "Call it that."

"Eminently sensible, you look for the main chance—money, wealth, the fat of the land, the good things of life. She appeals to me more than all this."

"And—and the end, for you and her?"

"Only one thing possible," he said; "love. She loves me; to-day in the storm she clung to me and begged me not to leave her—just as if I would! That man, her husband, with his round, red face and his beefy hands and his coarse voice, he is impossible to her. He is nothing, never has been anything to her; she is a child, utterly ignorant, utterly innocent."

"How do you know?"

"I have guessed; she has said things to me that a woman who was not as innocent as a child could never say. She spoke from the utter purity of her heart."

Sheila's lips formed the word "Rubbish." But she did not utter it.

"So—so you intend to——" She paused. "Go away with her, end it?"

"Begin it, begin life with her—yes."

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"And the future, money? Oh, yes, I am mercenary, I suppose, but one must have money to live on, and you have little enough."

"I have my work."

"Of course," she said, but there was a suggestion of sneering in her voice. She held his work in no high esteem.

"The man already depends on me," she was thinking. "This place is his—when she is gone he will need some one, he is the kind of man who must turn to a woman for sympathy. He will turn to me. It is unfortunate that Geoffrey is my brother, but that will not count with him. And then he can be free. He will understand it will be necessary for her sake. I suspect he will consider her even then before himself, before any one else. He is that sort of man." She frowned at her thoughts. "And then, when he is free——" Then she might take her place here as mistress of this old house.

The man himself was a drawback, a husband for no gentlewoman, no educated, intelligent woman like herself to be proud of. But the old place, the wealth, the luxuries she needed, would all be hers. The sacrifice would be worth while.

"And now, go," she said. "I am tired. Good-night, Geoffrey. I only ask one thing of you—do nothing till you have warned me, and do nothing yet—give me time; you must consider me."

He nodded and agreed and went out.

'Nid woke to the new day with the consciousness that something had changed in her life. She lay there while the warm sunshine poured into the room, lay there thinking. She shivered a little at the memory of the storm, the storm that had driven her into his arms.

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He understood her as no one ever had. He had talked to her as no one in this world ever had. He was different from Jim—different—it hardly seemed possible that they were of the same species. Jim without imagination, understanding nothing that he did not see, believing nothing but that he had been taught to believe in. He went to church regularly, accepted the Christian faith without cavil or question. He was just slow-going, unimaginative, honest—yes, he was honest—and he had been kind to her. Married life with Jim had not been terrible; looking back there had been nothing to shudder at.

He had been kind, he had treated her almost as he might have treated a child. Insensibly she had grown to depend on him, to look to him for protection. He was so big and so strong, so willing to aid her in any way. She could only remember one thing against him with a shudder of repulsion—that kiss that night when he had caught her and held her to his breast; that hot, passionate kiss. She had never quite forgiven that, though he had never offended again.

It was strange that she was thinking of him so much, going over in her mind her married life day by day with Jim in Pent Street. Those days had been happy enough for her, far—far happier than she had ever believed they could be. She, and Jim, too, had left Pent Street with real sorrow, real regret. It was like leaving home.

And to-day, presently, she must face this other man again, and facing him, would remember the happenings of yesterday. She felt nervous, shy, unwilling to see him; she almost wished never to see him again, and yet she liked him. Like—was it like—or was it the love she

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had heard so much about and had never properly understood?

One of the maidservants came tapping her door.

It was late, it was quite late. Was not my lady going to rise?

"My head aches," 'Nid said. "I'll stay where I am. Tell them that—that I shall not be down this morning."

Oh, coward that she was! She had never felt better in her life. She longed to be up and out in the sunshine, but she dreaded meeting him; the feeling would pass away, of course.

She rose when the girl had gone, dressed herself leisurely. They brought her breakfast and laid it on a table; she drank a little tea, but she had no appetite for food.

What would the girls at the Snowflake, what would Mrs. Melchor and the rest think and say could they have seen 'Nid's dainty, untouched breakfast this morning? She laughed merrily at the thought. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass and stared curiously and in a detached sort of way, utterly without vanity, at her own reflection.

"Am I pretty?" she asked of herself. "I look different somehow, my cheeks are not so thin and so sallow, there's colour in them and they seem a better shape, rounder. I'd like to think I was beautiful," she muttered. "It would be nice to feel you was worth looking at." And she must be, for was he not an artist who painted wonderful pictures? She knew, because he had told her so himself. If she was ugly he would not like her—artists only loved beautiful things, therefore she must be beautiful.

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"Daren't face me this morning," Geoffrey thought, when he heard the maid give her message. He wondered if it was a bad or a good sign. Good, he fancied—it meant she had been thinking of him a great deal.

Still, he felt vaguely dissatisfied, it was a disappointment to him; the morning lacked something beautiful—it was because there was no 'Nid. Yet he would go for his ride. The saddle-horse was brought round and 'Nid from her window saw him mount and ride away and breathed a little sigh of relief.

He was gone—'Nid put on her hat and slipped quietly down the stairs. She might have been a schoolgirl stealing away breaking bounds against orders. She was conscious of a feeling of subdued excitement.

She wanted to be alone, quite alone this morning, somewhere out on the hills where she could see the sea, where she could lie down on the soft turf and think, with the blue sky above her.

No one saw her steal out, she took care of that. Now she had gained the road and walked on quickly through the village. The village folk bobbed and curtsied to her, but they did not give her the smiles that they gave to her husband. No dog wagged its stumpy tail in the dust as she passed: the children did not come flocking to greet her; she would have been surprised if they had. She hated children, she told herself. A nuisance they were, always getting dirty and falling down and hurting themselves, and rows, always making rows. She hoped that she would never have any children, she would pray against such a calamity.

She had gained the hills, she climbed them with quickened breath and heightened colour. She gloried in the freedom, the sunshine, the loneliness. The wind kissed

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her cheeks, the free, fresh wind laden with a touch of the salt from the sea whence it had come. She snatched off her hat and let the wind play with her hair. She who told herself that she hated children was a child herself. She stooped and picked daisies, a bunch of the pretty grass with its little brown seedlings which grows on the Sussex Downs. She walked on till she could see the sea shimmering like the surface of a great golden shield in the distance, and then she lay down and put her elbows on the ground and supported her chin on her hands and looked her fill, if she could ever look her fill.

She lay there for an hour and then rose; she wandered on; the hill dipped—dipped to a winding road, a road running like an irregular white ribbon through the green. She gained the road and followed it for a time. It descended into a hollow where trees grew; she heard the ripple of running water among the trees, she saw a cottage.

It was a tiny place, a place of four rooms; it was empty. The door hung broken on its hinges, the old thatched roof was ragged and worn. Evidently it had not been tenanted for years. But there was a curious attraction about the place set here alone in the midst of the hills, surrounded by its little belt of trees with the trickling stream running by the broken door.

It had a strange, desolate charm of its own, a charm that appealed to her. She had to step across the stream to gain the door; she pushed it open and went in, went into a little bare room with a rusty old fireplace. Behind the room was a scullery or washhouse with a pump handle and a sink; from this room through a doorway that looked as if it opened into a cupboard she found steep, narrow stairs that led upwards.

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It was like a voyage of discovery, an exploration. She felt curiously excited about it, though it was nothing but a very ordinary little cottage, much the worse for age and neglect.

There were two rooms above with sloping eaves; in one room the floor was discoloured and rotting, due to a great gaping hole in the roof, through which she could see the blue sky.

The long-neglected, unpruned branches of an old apple tree tapped at the little leaden casement window to her. The ceaseless tapping and the ripple of the brook over the stones were the only sounds to disturb the silence and the solitude of the place—a place that seemed to be forgotten of man, lying here in a little dip in the hills, a little hollow of its own.

It was a place that most would have sniffed at with disdain, a place that suggested dampness, mould and decay. She never thought of dampness, she liked it; there was something about the little forgotten place that appealed to her. She would like to come here and live, leaving the big house and its servants and its spacious rooms behind her.

Live, live here, alone? She wondered. Yes, alone; why not alone? She had been crowded all her life, had lived all her short life among the busy swarm of humanity, had been elbowed and jostled always. Here she would have room, she could think her own thoughts, live her own life free, untrammelled.

It was with a sense of regret, reluctance, that she came away at last. She saw a little half-ruined, tumble-down shed outside and she peeped into it.

Evidently there had been stores kept here, some of the furniture of the late occupant. There was still a

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broken-down old table, some chairs (two), both damaged; a rusty iron bedstead, some battered boxes filled with rotten, ill-odoured straw.

Now she was back at the brook; child that she was she sat down on a stone and drew off her dainty, smart little shoes and her silken stockings; she thrust two bare feet into the brook and caught her breath at the touch of the icy cold water. Then she laughed and the colour flooded her cheeks. She stood up with her skirts gathered around her and watched the sparkling water surge around her slender ankles.

She forgot time, her new dignity, everything! She waded on, looking for those strange and interesting things that one finds in brooks. She prayed she might find a stickleback, a fish of some kind, but she found nothing but an ugly-looking newt, at which she shuddered and before which she retreated.

The newt decided her; she waded ashore and let the sun dry her little feet, then she replaced the silken hose and the dainty French shoes and made her way back to the hills. But looking back at the little cottage in the hollow she felt a keen regret at leaving it.

"I love it," she said. "It's just the place, I always seem to have had something like that in my mind. I'll come again, often and often. No one shan't know, it'll be like as if it belonged to me. I wonder who it does belong to; I wonder if he ever comes 'ere—here." It required almost a physical effort on her part to tear herself away, and now she was on the hills again—and then she saw him.

He was coming towards her, a big, ungainly figure in tweeds, walking slowly. There were four children with him, four little tousled, white-haired mites. One was

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clinging to his hand, the other three were lagging a little behind. And suddenly 'Nid felt that she did not want to be seen by him. There was a convenient clump of furze and she knelt behind it.

"Funny," she said to herself, "funny how fond he is of kids and them of him—they——" She corrected herself. "That there little 'un as is clinging to his 'and is too small to walk so far, it's a shame——" She paused. Evidently the same thought had struck Jim. He stooped suddenly and lifted the child; he set her on his shoulder and held her there securely. The sun shone down on the little untidy head of sunbleached hair that curled above the little round face. A little hand, perhaps none too clean, grabbed at Jim's bare head, caught at his hair and took a firm hold on it.

And watching, 'Nid was suddenly conscious of something, something she did not understand, a sudden quick throb of her heart, a sudden mist of tears before her eyes.

Foolish! What did it mean? She who hated children and cared nothing for this man, what did it mean?

"I am a fool!" she muttered. "I don't understand!"

And she did not, but she lay there and watched him and the tag of children at his heels, and they were descending the hill to the winding, white road that she had just now left. And when the dip in the hill hid them she stood up so that she might see them again—Jim's great, strong figure with the tiny child perched on his shoulder, and the sun made a splash of vivid light on the child's bare head.

And then suddenly on to 'Nid there descended a feeling of loneliness, a strange feeling of loneliness, of

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hunger for something, something that she did not understand.

They were gone, mere specks in the far distance, gone down to the white, winding road, the man and the children. But she could not see them for the tears had come and all was misty in the golden sunlight.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY TWO

BEEN-out, Kid?" Jim's eyes met hers shyly.
"Yes," she said. They stood in the hall; he had just come in, had followed her in, half an hour later.

He looked down at his white, dusty boots nervously. His big hands fumbled awkwardly with the edge of his coat.

"Been fur?" he asked.

"Out on the hills!"

"You," he said. "And me, too, I've been that way. Some time, 'Nid——" He paused. "I wonder if you—you'd come out there with me. Not 'orse riding, I don't mean, that isn't in my line. Just me and you tramping. Would you, 'Nid, just once? You don't know what it's like out there and——"

"I do, for I've been there this morning," she said. "Out there alone!"

"Would you come with me one day?" he asked pleadingly.

She nodded and laughed; she looked at him, looked him full in the eyes. She wondered why she had never noticed what kind eyes he had. No wonder children trusted and loved him.

"And if I got tired?" she said. "What then, Jim? Would—would you lift me on to your shoulder and carry me, too?"

"Then—then you saw?" he said. "You saw me?"

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"Yes!"

"And didn't tell me you was there, 'Nid," he said.

"You—you had your friends along with you!" she said. "They didn't want me, you neither, perhaps, Jim!"

"I—I always want you, want you—more——" He paused. His voice was shaken with a strange note, into his eyes came a strange light that reminded her of that night, the night she hated, the memory of which she tried to put out of her mind.

"I—I don't see enough of you, 'Nid. I'm just 'ungry for a sight of you. Now and again I miss Pent Street, I do. I wish—I wish I 'adn't never, never seen this place. I curse it and 'ate it, curse it every minnit of every day, every minnit of the day and the night. I'd give it all—all for our old 'ome in Pent Street, just me—me and you, 'Nid, and——" He had drawn himself up, he stood with his great strong hands clenched. He looked foolish, awkward no longer. He looked what he was, a great strong man, stirred suddenly to the depths of his soul, of his being. A man who loved and craved for love in return, a man who had cried for bread and had been handed a stone, on which he had ground his teeth impotently.

And then the change came swiftly over him. He was the nervous, awkward, ill-placed boor again, for a door had opened and Sheila Clare had come out. She looked at him brightly. She laughed and shook her head.

"Oh, James, those dusty boots of yours again," she said sweetly.

But sweetly though she had said it, he blushed awkwardly to his ears.

"I am sorry," he said; "I'll go and change 'em," and he moved sheepishly away.

CHAPTER XV

ADrift

FEAR had come to 'Nid, fear of what she hardly knew. Fear of Geoffrey Clare, of herself, of her vague longings, the curious sense of hunger at her heart. But it was not a fear that was entirely unpleasant, it was fear that was partly joy. The fear that a maid might feel at the approach of a man who is not distasteful to her, the fear she might feel at hearing impassioned words of love that she scarcely understands and yet which are sweet to her.

'Nid did not know her own mind. She liked Geoffrey Clare with a liking she had never given to any one else. He was different from any one else; he understood her as poor, slow-going, heavy-brained Jim never had nor could. He could enter into her thoughts, could even read them, and unspoken questions in her mind were sometimes answered by him in a startling manner. For he was clever and had the gift of intuition. When he saw her beautiful, dreamy eyes fixed wistfully, with some vague longing, on the sea, he gently touched a chord that he knew would respond and vibrate to his touch. It brought them closer together.

He talked to her in the affected manner of the studios and suburban tea parties of "soul mates" and "congenial spirits." And she, knowing nothing of the humbug of it, listened and was thrilled.

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With her it was all a matter of spirit, with him all a matter of the flesh. But he was clever enough to hide the growing passion for her. He knew that she was easily frightened, timid as a fawn, quick to take fright. So he kept himself in control and talked to her the rubbish of which he was a past-master. For how often had he talked that same drivel to other women and duly impressed them?

He stood on the breezy Downs and quoted Omar to her. She did not understand it in the least, but she was thrilled, she loved it, loved it the better because it was beyond her comprehension.

And, oh, the tenderness he could so skilfully put into his rich, mellow voice. How she thrilled at the words, what meaning they had for her!

"Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse,—and Thou
Beside me, singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow."

The Downs were her paradise, the glint of the sea like heaven, his voice was the only thing needful to complete the spell. She did not realise that she was drifting into real and terrible danger, there was no one to tell her.

Jim trusted her absolutely. He longed for her companionship, longed for her with a great and growing hunger. She was his and yet not his; she bore his name, was his wife, and there it all ended. He knew that she was less his now than she had been before their marriage when she was only a girl working in a laundry.

But sometimes the desire, born of fear, to get away from every one came to Enid. And then she would slip quietly out of the house and go tramping away across

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the Downs, down into the little hollow where the old deserted cottage was. And there, like a child, she would play at "keeping house."

These were perhaps the happiest moments of her life. She knew every nook and cranny in the old place. She would lay aside her silk stockings and her pretty shoes and paddle bare-footed in the stream like a child. She would tell one of the servant maids to wrap up a little luncheon for her and she would bring it here and spend the long day in happy solitude, never for a moment dull, enjoying every moment of it with all a child's thoroughness of enjoyment.

But sometimes when she came into the dell where the cottage was, she heard voices and laughter. She knew that others came here sometimes. They had left traces behind, scraps of food, withered flowers. She did not know who these others were, but she felt a queer hatred of them. They were trespassers; she wanted the little place to herself—hated to think that others shared it with her. When she heard those voices and the laughter, then she would shrink back and go quietly away with a feeling of unhappiness and loss, a sense of having been cheated of something.

Geoffrey Clare, with consummate skill and patience, had played on her heartstrings. He had watched for the wonder in her beautiful eyes and he had seen it.

"You seem to understand me more'n—more than—any one else ever did," she said. "It's like as if you—it is as though you felt about things just the same as I do."

He liked the quaint way in which she always made mistakes and always corrected them. There was nothing about her that he did not like. He was really in love,

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unselfishly and yet selfishly in love with her. She had appealed to him as no other woman ever had. He thought of his many past love affairs and shrugged his shoulders. They had been all ordinary, if pretty girls. There was nothing distinctive about them. One excelled in eyes, another in lips, another had a beautiful voice, another was clever and interesting. But in 'Nid seemed the embodiment of all the attractions.

And meanwhile Sheila's ascendancy over Jim was increasing. He seemed to be helpless without her. The London carpenter, pitchforked by fate into this fine mansion, made suddenly master of broad acres and of great wealth, was hopelessly at sea. He needed some one's guiding hand. Sheila was there to guide him, tenderly and playfully, yet more strongly than he knew.

"Enid is only a child," she said to him; "leave her to herself. It is a great pity, of course, that you and she married when you did. She was not old enough to know her own mind, so, dear friend, you must wait."

She always called him "dear friend," and he liked it. In his heart he had a fear of her—she was so much above him, she belonged to a different world, a world of which he knew nothing and was as yet learning nothing.

"Enid is only a child; she is not eighteen yet, is she? And she might be fourteen and have lived all her life in a convent," Sheila said.

"I thought she might—might have got to care a little for me by now," he said. "But I s'pose——" He paused; "I ain't—the sort 'Nid 'ud ever care much for. I don't understand 'er like she wants to be understood."

"Your marriage was a mistake; still, you must make the best of it," she said.

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Yes, it was a mistake; it was dawning on him, and the knowledge hurt him, hurt him terribly. He hungered for his girl wife, his heart longed for her. The indifferent kiss she gave him now and again simply because it was her duty to kiss the man who was her husband pained him. It set his blood dancing for a moment, sent a thrill through him, and then came again the bitterness of hopelessness. He watched her sometimes when she did not know it, watched her with his heart and his soul in his eyes.

Would she ever come to care for him? He thought not—hope was dying.

And Sheila, watching him, understanding him, felt a sense of fury. What a fool he was! The girl was not worth troubling about, a little twopenny-ha'penny laundry hand!

"You think too much of her and she isn't worth it! I don't believe she has a heart at all; she's just a selfish little creature not worth the love or the thought of such a man as you, James."

He stared open-eyed at her.

"'Nid not—not worth me, a chap like me?" he said. He flushed. "Why, she's worth a thousand of me. She's in 'er way as much above me as you are, Miss!"

To her anger he always called Sheila "Miss"; it was a habit she had tried vainly to break him of.

"You are a fine man, a rich man, well born and a gentleman by birth, and she—what is she? A child from the gutter. I tell you she isn't worthy of you, she isn't good enough for you, Jim!"

"Don't—don't say that, I won't listen to you; you—you don't know what you're talking about," he said with such real anger that she trembled for a moment for her

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ascendancy over him; but he was apologising the next moment.

And so life went on for them all. Every day Jim and 'Nid drifted further and further apart. Every day Geoffrey Clare brought all his arts of enchantment to bear, and he was winning, he knew that. Once since the night when the storm had overtaken them he had tried to kiss her, had kissed her. But he had seen the sudden fear, the almost loathing in her face, had felt her draw away from him as though she was beginning to suspect him, and he never made the same mistake again.

"She's driving me mad," he said to his sister. "She's just a little cold icicle, but I'll wake her heart up yet."

"The sooner the better! I am getting sick of this. I'm tired of playing bear leader; for heaven's sake do something soon!" Sheila said.

"You must help me," he said.

"I?"

He nodded. "Talk to him, tell him that she is his wife, say that he has played the fool long enough. He will listen to you; you can talk to him, you're a woman; I couldn't, you understand? Tell him that the only way he can break down 'Nid's coldness is for him to be strong and bold, eh? Tell him to attack—you understand?"

She nodded. "And then?"

"Then she'll be afraid, she'll turn to me, her friend; she will hate him, fear him!"

"It all sounds ridiculous," Sheila said.

"It may to you, but I understand 'Nid."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Please call her Enid when you speak to me about her. Remember I did not work in the laundry with her."

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But she took his advice, she spoke to Jim. She was clever like her brother. She could speak delicately and even then make herself understood to his slow-going brain.

She summed it all up in a few words. "Faint heart never won fair lady"; and why need he be fainthearted?

The girl was his lawful, legal, wedded wife!

"She'll think more of you, James. Insist on your rights. You are her husband, you have the right to kiss her on the lips. I see she gives you her cheek. Kiss her to-night on the lips. If she does not like it, insist the more. You've got to beat down this silly, senseless modesty of hers."

"But she'd 'ate me," Jim said—he remembered that night in Pent Street.

"Not she! She's a woman; she would like you the better for it, admire you, come to love you as you deserve to be loved."

"I—I'd 'ate to 'urt her or frighten 'er," he said. "I'd sooner cut off my right hand."

"Folly!" she said. "How foolish you men are; you don't understand women; women like to be bullied and coerced. They admire a strong, resolute man and they hate a coward, and you are playing a coward's part with 'Nid."

And so that night, against his own judgment, yet because he needed her so, because his heart hungered for her so, because he believed that Sheila was infinitely more clever than he was, he followed her advice. When 'Nid gave him her cheeks to kiss as she wished him good-night he caught her suddenly in his arms as he had that night in Pent Street. She struggled, but it was useless.

Sheila understood, she was right, for too long he had been wrong. So he held her, he forced her little face

towards his, he looked down into her angry and terror-stricken eyes. He pressed his lips to hers and then he let her go, feeling himself a brute, hating himself, but loving her with a mad, passionate intensity.

And the girl fled shaking and white to her own room and locked the door on herself.

She could not sleep. She rose and went out into the grey dawn. She went out on to the Downs and watched the sun rise. She felt she could not face her husband again; she told herself that she hated him. She thought of London, even of the laundry—anything, any place so long as it meant escape. His kisses—she scrubbed her red lips till they were sore—the kisses of any man—hateful! And then in the sunrise she saw this other man who understood her only too well.

"'Nid," he said. "What is wrong? I heard you pacing your room in the night, I felt that something was wrong, dear. I heard you come out and I have followed you!"

"Wrong!—everything is wrong. I 'ate——" She paused, "hate," she said, and then paused again.

It was his chance, his opportunity. In his mind he laughed at her for a little fool; he knew what had happened, for Sheila had spied on them and told him. But he dragged a confession from her.

"The brute!" he said. "The brute! He does not understand you." He talked to her of the soul and the spirit, the same old jargon that he knew she loved.

"You cannot trust yourself with that man," he said. "You want freedom, another life, something that I could offer you, 'Nid, my—my darling. Listen. When I first saw your dear face I knew memory worked in my soul. I knew that in some past age you and I were all the

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world to one another. This life is not all; behind us is a curtain, thick, heavy, impenetrable, yet it is given to us now and again to lift the curtain for one brief moment, to peep behind, to see the past. And I have seen beyond the curtain, 'Nid. He was wrong who wrote,

“There was a door to which I found no key,
There was a veil past which I could not see.”

I have seen beyond the veil, 'Nid. I saw you—you and myself in the past ages!”

And she listened to this trivial stuff and believed in it because it all seemed like an answer to her own dim thoughts, her own unformed ideas.

It was some hours later that one of the village boys came and slipped a letter into Sheila's hand. It was hastily scribbled, a note written in the local post office.

“It's all right, it worked as I knew it would. We're off and away, 'Nid and I. Wish us joy. I leave you to deal with the man. I've got enough for immediate necessities, but send me a draft for all you can manage to the Hotel Boulogne, Paris.”

And Sheila smiled as she tore the note into tiny fragments.

Jim, heavy-eyed through lack of sleep, came and joined her in the garden.

“Seen 'Nid?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, I cannot understand where she has hidden herself. I suppose she has another of her wandering fits on her, and I wonder——” she added softly. “I wonder where Geoffrey can be?” She looked at him, but his eyes were innocent of suspicion, for he trusted 'Nid with a trust that was complete, almost sublime.

CHAPTER XVI

HOW THE NEWS CAME TO JIM

JIM wandered about aimlessly and disconsolately all the day. Luncheon time came and there was no 'Nid.

"I cannot understand where Geoffrey can be," Sheila said. "It is very odd—and Enid, too—— Strange they should both be absent."

She looked at him, wondering how long it would be before he began to suspect. But he suspected nothing; his own blundering honesty never led him to think of 'Nid's being untrue to him.

Evening, and the sun was sinking over the Downs, the birds homing to their nests, the red glow of the sunset in the sky turning the distant Downs to deep purple. The old mill in the far distance almost black, clear cut against the sky. And she had not come back, nor the man.

Something stirred uneasily in his mind, a thought came, a suspicion. But he put it away from him. She had gone out, had forgotten the passing of time, had made a day of it. She had gone to the sea of course, her beloved sea. She would be back presently, explaining apologising perhaps. No, she would not apologise, 'Nid never did.

Or it might be—a sense of personal shame came to him, he remembered that passionate kiss of last night,

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the horror and terror in her face. Had she run away from him then, dreading lest he should offend again?

"James, it is curious that Enid has not come back." It was Sheila's clear voice. "It is also curious that my brother should be away at the same time."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly:

She came to him and slipped her hand into his.

"James, you have married a wife who does not understand you, whom you will never understand, a foolish, romantic girl with ridiculous ideas. I am sorry to say that as she is, so is my brother. I have no patience with the nonsense of which he talks and in which he believes. I know that he and Enid have been talking this nonsense—affinities of the soul, kindred spirits, meetings in a previous existence, and all that stuff and nonsense." She laughed a little harshly. Jim looked at her.

"What d'ye mean?" he repeated. "You—you got something on your mind; there is something you want to say—say it." His face had gone very white. "Go on, say it."

"James," she said, "Jim"—her fingers tightened on his—"I am your friend; if evil has happened, if—if what I dread and fear should be true, it—it will not make you turn against me, hate me because that man happened to—to be my brother?"

"So—so, you mean that?" he said. "You mean you think him and 'er has gorn—gorn away together, left me—'Nid?"

"James, I fear it is only too true. I have dreaded it, feared it. I spoke to Geoffrey, I told him that so long as he lived I would never forgive him, never look at him

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again, renounce him as my brother if he brought shame and pain to you."

Jim nodded slowly. "It isn't your fault he's your brother," he said. "You don't need to blame yourself, you can't help what brothers and sisters you 'ad, no one can. But I don't believe——" His voice shook. "I don't believe bad of 'Nid; I don't believe it's in 'er to be bad. I don't believe she'd ever care for any man. She—she's like that; she's only a kid, a little 'un. Chaps at the shed laughed at me when they see me with 'er. One of 'em arst me if I'd adopted 'er and I said yes, and—that—that seems to be 'ow it 'as been all along. I don't believe——" He paused suddenly, then as suddenly tore his hand from hers and strode away. He went out into the night and walked—walked hard, walked till utter weariness came to him. And as he walked he said to himself: "I don't believe, I don't believe. 'Nid's good and right and—and innocent, she is. 'Nid's only a kid. I didn't ought to have married 'er, I ought to 'ave waited—I won't believe."

Sheila watched and waited for him with growing impatience and annoyance. He always annoyed her, he was a fool, but he was a rich fool. This place that she had once regarded as Geoffrey's and her own was his.

He would free himself, of course, he would put an end to that ridiculous marriage. Then, free, she would marry him. She shuddered a little at the prospect, yet she had made up her mind to it, and she would not spare herself. Married to him, they could live their own lives. Fortunately he was a man it would be easy to ignore. She could leave him out of her calculations,

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she could spend the greater part of her time away from him.

Sitting here in the softly lighted old drawing-room she made her plans for the future with a certainty that was surprising.

At last she heard his step outside. She would know it from all others, heavy and uncertain. No servant walked so badly as he did.

"Yes, I'll do that," she muttered. "It'll end matters, anyhow."

He would have passed the open door and gone to his own room, but she called to him.

"Jim, I—I wish to speak to you; I have something to say. I have been waiting for you."

He came in; his face was white and tired looking.

"Well?" he said.

"I have had news—a message was brought to me, a message from the man I once called brother, Jim," she said.

He nodded and came a little further into the room.

"Oh, Jim, it is true, only—only too true," she said with a catch in her voice.

"You—you mean 'im and 'Nid; mean that—that they've gone together?" he said.

"Yes, they have gone to—to Paris, he and she! Oh, Jim, Jim, I am so ashamed, so heart-broken!" She held her face down to hide her perfectly dry eyes.

"So that's it!" he said. He repeated the words, "So that's it!"

He sighed and said it again and again. "So that's it." Then he turned and went out. She heard him blundering across the hall.

"So that's it," she said in imitation of his voice. "Yes,

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that is it, my friend. Now you know, now you understand, you've lost her, and so much the better. You will rid yourself of her and make room for me."

She rose and moved about the drawing-room; she examined the valuable old furniture, the several pieces of well-nigh priceless china, she looked at the pictures. It was worth it; the man was impossible, of course, still the man's possessions, they were worth it. So she smiled to herself and went to bed.

Jim sat alone in his room, his hands clenched and resting on the table before him, his eyes fixed, staring into vacancy. "So—so that's it," he said again. It seemed as if he could say nothing else.

"I done 'er a wrong marrying 'er; she was too young, she didn't understand. Maybe she—she don't prop'ly understand now, I don't think she does. Poor 'Nid, poor little 'un!"

And then suddenly there came to him a great hunger for her, all his pent-up love for her flamed up. He clenched his hands, the perspiration ran down his face.

"And I loved 'er, worshipped 'er, worshipped the very ground 'er little feet trod on," he said hoarsely. "I'd 'a died for 'er willing if—if she 'ad come to me and said, 'Jim—Jim, I can't never be 'appy with you, I want to be free, and the only one way for me to be free——' I'd 'a done it, died for 'er, died for 'er to be free. But now—now——" He dropped his face on to his shaking hands suddenly.

And so an hour passed and another and another and he sat there motionless. And outside the night waned and the stars paled before the coming of the new dawn.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BEST FOR HER

WHO could guess from the look of him at the tragedy that filled his soul, the emptiness, the hunger, the torn and ruined love, the sorrow? To the servants he was the same as usual, and so he was even to Sheila's sharp eyes. His face was heavy and impassive as ever. He ate his breakfast with no lack of appetite. Another and a man of finer feeling might have shuddered at the thought of food, but Jim did not. Food was necessary, it was fuel to the engine—he ate.

During the meal, while the servants were present, they talked of indifferent things. No reference was made to the two absent ones. If the servants wondered, they had to keep their wonder to themselves.

It was not till they were alone that Jim spoke.

"You've 'eard nothing more?"

"Nothing more, there is nothing more to hear. They will be in Paris by this time," she said.

He nodded. "I s'pose so," he said.

She waited, but nothing came. This man was annoying, exasperating. She could have understood if he had flown into a violent rage, if he had cursed Geoffrey and even the girl, too, but he did nothing of the sort.

"I shouldn't 'ave believed it," he said quietly. "I s'pose it's all right, your message? 'E sent it?"

"It was right, there is not the slightest doubt he—

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he wrote; I tore the letter up in a fit of fury. I wish I had not now, I would have shown it to you."

"If you say so it's all right. I believe what you tell me," he said.

"Paris," he repeated. "Paris—'Nid in Paris."

She looked up at him suddenly, and an idea, a suspicion flashed into her mind.

"Jim, what—what are you going to do? You—you're not going to follow them, you aren't going to Paris?"

He turned and looked at her. "Me," he said simply. "Why?"

She drew a long breath of relief. She had foreseen a scandal, a scene, perhaps a crime. Such things had happened. She knew that if it had come to a man-to-man struggle—Geoffrey and Jim—Geoffrey, her brother, would have been helpless as a baby in the big man's grip, and in her way she was fond of her brother, she did not wish harm to come to him. But she might have known, of course, he would not follow them, she had been a fool to put such a thought into his head.

"Where are you going?" she asked sharply.

"Out," he said. "I'm going to see Baring. I—I want a bit of a talk with him."

Baring was the steward of the estate.

"Oh, and you will be back when?"

"Lunch, I s'pose," he said. "By then you may have 'ad something else."

"It is not likely," she said.

He went out; he was gone all the morning. Just before luncheon he came in again.

"It's all right," she heard him mutter. He had a habit of talking to himself, which was one of the things about

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him she objected to. "That's all right." He spoke in tones of relief.

He came in to luncheon, he ate with his usual appetite. She felt disgusted; she watched him. The man was a soulless, senseless creature; he accepted almost indifferently what might have been almost a death blow to another man. He could eat huge meals and talk of indifferent subjects and spend the morning with his steward just as though nothing had happened.

"James, I wish to speak to you, if you think of going out again," she said.

He nodded. "I was going out," he said, "but I can stay and 'ear anything you've got to say to me."

"What are you going to do?" she asked sharply. He was taxing her patience to its utmost.

"To do?"

Sheila stamped her foot. "Yes, do. Great Heavens, do!" she cried. "Your wife has deserted you, she has gone with that man who was my brother. I renounce him, I will never look at him again. What are you going to do about this I ask? Are you going to do what any sane man would do—free yourself, give her the chance of becoming an honest woman? Answer me."

Her eyes flamed at him, his stupidity was driving her mad.

"I've thought about all that," he said. "I've thought about it. It's early days yet. I want time—time to do the best as I can for—for 'Nid."

"There is only one thing you can do for her—free her," she said. "And you owe it to yourself, too." She paused; she might speak to this man as she could not to any other man.

"Listen to me. You have been treated shamefully, so

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have I. You trusted that woman, I trusted that man, my brother; we are both shamed and humiliated. The best thing you can do for her, for Enid, is to set her free. When you have done so you will need a mistress in this house of yours, some one who understands, who can help you as a wife should. If you find that you do need such a woman, then—then you needn't have far to look, Jim."

"You mean," he said, "you mean that if I get rid of 'Nid you'd be willing to marry me?"

"That is what I mean."

He nodded slowly. "I thought of that, too," he said. "Only—only I want time—time to think. I don't believe in acting in no 'urry, I want time to think."

He turned to the door, stumbling against a little table, upsetting it and sending it and its contents into ruin on the ground. He did not pause to look at the damage he had done; he went out and slammed the door after him. Then he opened the door again.

"I didn't mean to bang it," he said. "It was the wind as caught it." And with this apology he went.

She laughed, laughed furiously. The man was hopeless, impossible, a clod, a thing without feeling. Why heaven had ever fashioned such a man, and moreover had made him a Bevanwood, she could not think.

Jim went out; he strode stolidly down the long avenue; he came to the road and made his way to the village. At one of the cottages in the village he paused. As usual the children came flocking to him.

"'Ere, little uns, go and buy yourself stick-jaw," he said. He gave them a shilling and sent them away, well enough contented.

"Your Billy in, Mrs. Wasser?" he asked.

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Mrs. Wasser, wife to Mr. George Wasser, one of Jim's under-gardeners, came to the door drying her red hands on her apron.

"My Billy, 'e's gone on the Downs, Sir James," she said.

"Maybe I'll find 'im all right?" he said. "Everythink all right?"

She smiled. "Everything's been all right, Sir James, since you come," she said.

"Got the joint in for Sunday?" he asked.

"No, I—I 'adn't thought of it yet, and, oh—thank you, Sir James, I'm sure," she added.

"Take my advice," he said, "and git beef, there's more in beef than there is in mutton. You don't 'ear no talk about the roast mutton of old England, it's beef all the time as put England where she is now, that and beer. You don't never 'ear me running down good honest ale. I say a man as does 'is work proper needs something to keep up 'is strength and courage, so——" He paused, conscious that he was making a long speech. "Beef makes blood and flesh," he said. "Git beef." Then he turned away and the woman stared after him.

"I don't know what they say of him," she said. "Nor I don't care, but this I do know, that I wish there was a few more made like him."

And so the man with the impassive face and the lumbering stride and the aching heart went down the sunny village street, and at the end of the street where the road turns whiter and rises to the swell of the Downs, he met a small, freckled, red-haired boy of about thirteen.

"I been looking for you, Billy Wasser," he said.

"Well, 'ere I be, governor," the boy said. "Going to——"

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Sir James Bevanwood nodded. "You come with me, I want to talk with you," he said. "I'm going——" He paused. "Going away for a bit."

The boy's face fell.

"Not fur, Billy," Jim said. "Not so fur as you carn't pop in and see me now and a bit."

"Oh, you mean there?" the boy said. "Going to live there?"

"That's about the size of it, Billy. You see, it's like this way with me. I've got a bit of thinking to do, a bit of real 'ard thinking. Things isn't—isn't what they might be, and I've got to think a way out, a best way for—for 'er——" He paused. "Best way for everybody, and I don't believe in doin' nothing in a 'urry. I want to think——" He paused. "And when a man's got thinking to do, why, 'e carn't be listening to chatter all the time; a man's got to be alone to think prop'ly."

The boy nodded; he looked at his big friend with wise blue eyes.

"So you be going down there to—do your think?" he said.

"That's it, Billy, that's the idea I got into my 'ead, and you—you're going to 'elp me. You see, I don't want no one to know where I'm gorn to, otherwise I'd 'ave—some of 'em round worrying me. I just want to be alone, all alone. I've got a deal of 'ard thinking to do, Billy boy."

"Where do I come in, governor?"

"That's it," Jim said. "Well, I'll be wanting things. I shan't want to come 'ere to get 'em. I shan't want no one to know where I am. You got to tell your mother I'm travelling a bit and I want you to come with me, see?"

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The boy's face beamed. "And—and you mean you'll 'ave me along with you down there?"

"That's it. You'll have to fetch and carry for me. We'll 'ave to git what we want over from Horswood; it's a long tramp, we'll 'ave to git a bicycle." He paused.

They were on the Downs now. He sat down suddenly on the turf and brought out a pocket-book. From the pocket-book he selected a visiting-card engraved "Sir James Bevanwood, Bart., Bevanwood, Amerhurst, Sussex."

"Billy, you got to go back to your mother and tell 'er," he said, "about your coming with me. Say as I met you and want you. Say you'll be away a week or two, maybe a month or two, but you'll be all right with me."

The boy nodded.

"And this'll be so as she'll know it's all right."

Jim nibbled the end of his pencil and then wrote laboriously:

"TO MRS. WASSER,—I want your Billy to come with me, he'll be alright and wel looked after, don't worrie about him, so no more at present, from yours truley, J. BEVANWOOD."

He wrote this on the back of the card till it overflowed, so he finished it on the front.

"You take that to 'er and I'll wait 'ere till you come back," he said. And then he stretched himself out on the soft turf and lay staring up at the blue skies, and already James Bevanwood was beginning his deep, hard thinking and the burden of his thoughts was always—"What's the best I can do for 'er?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FEAR

YOU'LL need things," Geoffrey said; "you can get all you need in London."

"Then we are going to London?" the girl said.

"At first; after that we shall leave for the sea. We shall stay at Dover the night and cross by the morning boat to France."

"France, I never been there; it's across the sea," she said.

"You'll enjoy every minute of Paris," he said. "It's a new life for you. I'm opening the book of the world to you, 'Nid, and I shall get my reward in seeing the wonder and delight in your sweet eyes, darling."

"Don't," she said. "Don't call me that, I don't like it. Some'ow it seems to spoil everything. Just 'Nid'll do."

He smiled to himself.

They had walked across the Downs in the early morning to Horswood, from Horswood they took train to London. He would need things himself; he must have clothes, just enough to present a creditable appearance. It gave him a thrill of pleasure to see men in the street turn their heads for another glance at the girl beside him. They admired her and envied him probably—that's what he wanted.

"She belongs to me," he thought. "Mine entirely. There's no going back now."

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He went with her to do the shopping. He went to the bank and drew out the last penny he had there. He reckoned it would just about see him through, pay for her needs, the trip and the hotel expenses, and then Sheila was sure to send him a remittance, he could reckon on that.

In order that Sir James Bevanwood should have every possible facility for prosecuting his suit when the time came, he took 'Nid to his own chambers.

His manservant made tea for them. Before Watson, the man, he spoke unguardedly of their future movements.

"We'll stay at Dover to-night; to-morrow we'll cross to Paris," he said. "We'll have a few weeks there. It will be a glorious time, 'Nid, just you and I together and alone."

The man stared, but he said nothing. What should he say?

"Pack me all I shall want for about a month; don't overdo it, Watson. And if any letters come for me address them to me at the Hotel Boulogne, Paris."

"Very good, sir," the man said stiffly. He stared hard at 'Nid.

"Lady Bevanwood and I——" Geoffrey paused as though he had let slip something that he had not intended. He saw that the man had heard and he smiled to himself.

An hour later they were in the train for Dover, and she, tired out, wondering a little, frightened, a little ill at ease, fell asleep. She slept as soundly and as sweetly as a child might, rocked and lulled by the movement of the train. And, watching her, a great consuming passion for her came to him.

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He watched the dark shadows of her lashes against her cheeks, the red rose mouth of her, the wonderful hair, the unstudied grace of her attitude, the little child-like hands. He bent forward, he fell on his knees and pressed his lips to her hands, softly so not to waken her.

He knew it was the passion, the love of his life, the love compared with which all other loves had been savourless, commonplace and ordinary. He even made himself believe that all the rubbish of love in a previous stage of existence had really been between him and her. He wanted to believe it.

When she woke she found his burning eyes on her and she shivered with a new fear, a new dread. But she was tired, the sleep had made her dull and heavy. She wanted only to rest, to go to bed and rest and sleep till the morning came.

They went to an hotel.

"Will you stop at the same hotel as me?" she asked.

"Will I? Why, of course," he said. "Don't you wish it, 'Nid?"

"I don't know as I thought—that I thought about it," she said wearily. "All I want is to go to sleep. I'm tired, tired to death. I don't know——" She paused; she thought of Jim. She fancied she could see the pain and surprise in his face. She did not want to hurt him. He had been very good to her, very good except twice. Remembering that twice she shivered a little.

He had ordered a private sitting-room where the dinner was served. 'Nid had no appetite. She was haunted by this vision of Jim, Jim suffering, Jim with pained eyes. Yes, he had been good to her in many,

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many ways. He had not sent her back to work at the laundry, for one thing, as some men did. He had made life pleasant for her. It was Jim who had first taken her to see the sea.

"Darling, what are you thinking of?" he said. He had been studying her face eagerly, his own eyes glowing.

She started. "I asked you not to—to call me that," she said with quiet dignity. "Somehow it don't sound right. I'm thinking I'm tired, I want to go to bed and to sleep; my head aches and I'm a bit worried. It'll be all right in the morning. Can I go now?"

"Yes, why not? Go now," he said. He rose.

"'Nid," he cried suddenly. "'Nid." He held out his arms to her. "This is what I have been hoping for and praying for. Just you and I alone, darling, my beloved."

His passion, so long pent up and restrained, so long held in check, broke down all barriers now. He had won, and was eager to taste of the fruits of his victory. He had won, she belonged to him, had cast off all the world to follow him. She was here with him alone. Discretion and all the cunning chicanery and mock sentiment he flung to the winds. She was his now and never could she escape him.

He held her in his arms, struggling a little, panting, a trembling frightened thing, and holding her, kissed her upon the lips and eyes.

Strong with the passion that had found expression at last, her feeble opposition was hopeless. She tried to thrust her little hands into his face, and then, realising her feebleness, she looked up, terror-stricken, to plead mutely for help and pity and mercy; and looking up, she

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saw his eyes, and seeing them, a great loathing and a great fear of him came to her.

There was that in his eyes that would haunt her sleeping and waking for long, long to come. There was in them an evil and a meaning that even now her brain could not grasp, could not understand, but which yet brought a chill horror and great overwhelming fear to her.

"Let me go—for God's sake, let—me go!" she cried. "Oh, let me go——" And, fighting with her last vestige of strength, she broke away from him.

And then he saw the look in her face, the horror and fear in her eyes, and the mad passion of a moment ago was gone. He had frightened her, fool that he was, he had forgotten caution, he had been too impatient.

"'Nid," he said. "I'm sorry—sorry—dear. I did not mean to hurt you. Forgive me—'Nid."

He stood there, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"I won't offend again," he said. "'Nid, trust me, I won't offend again; it is because I love you so."

She was making towards the door. Beyond the door lay safety. She dared not look at him again; she knew that towards him her feelings had utterly changed. During the last minute, that minute when he had held her struggling and afraid, the great revulsion had come. She hated him now and feared him, but even greater than her fear was her hatred and loathing of him for the evil that had peeped at her from out his eyes, a look that she had never seen in the eyes of James Bevanwood, or of any other man.

And now there came to her a cunning born of her desperate fear. She must escape him, leave him, and yet he must not guess at her intentions, or surely he would

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not let her go. So she turned to him with a smile that she was desperately put to to conjure up.

"I am so—so tired," she said. "So tired—you—you must forgive me if I am—stupid—it is only because I am so tired."

He smiled indulgently. "Poor little 'Nid," he said softly. "Poor little girl, I was a brute to you. I'm sorry, but you forgive me, dear?"

"Yes, I forgive you," she said. "But, oh, I am so—so tired, the day has been so long."

She had gained the door now, and beyond that door lay liberty and freedom, and he never guessed. Indeed, he came and opened the door for her and smiled down at her, the slender little figure, white faced and with the great wistful eyes that she kept resolutely hidden from him that he might not see that new expression that had come into them.

"Good-night," he said. "Good-night, my beloved." And as he spoke he smiled at the thoughts that came to him.

So she passed out on to the landing, but knowing he was still standing there, watching her, she turned to the bedroom that she understood was to be hers; and then she went in and locked the door on herself and stood there, shaking and faint, leaning against the door listening lest he should follow her; but he did not come yet.

And so she waited for many minutes, how long she did not know. The hat and the cloak she had thrown off still lay on the bed. She went to it and put them on and then crept to the door again, and with infinite caution turned the key and opened the door a few inches and looked out on to the landing.

The Fear

He was not there; the place was deserted, for it was growing late, and all the hotel was quiet.

So, mastering her fear, she came out and crept down the wide stairs to the hall where there was only the night porter, who looked at her curiously.

"I'm going—going out," she said unsteadily. "My head is bad, it aches badly. I want to walk; the night air'll do me good. I shall be back soon."

He opened the door to her and she went out. She found herself in unfamiliar streets under the cool night sky. Once she looked back, only once, and then she walked on and on, far into the night, till she had left the town behind her. She walked on through deserted, silent country roads, through little sleeping hamlets, walked till the dawn was in the sky and the rose tint of the new day made the world beautiful.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW JIM MADE A NEW HOME

A BOY brought it, Mrs. Wasser's boy. He said there was no answer and he has gone."

Sheila Clare nodded. She took the note. It bore her own name scrawled in the unformed, schoolboy hand of Jim Bevanwood.

"What message has the idiot sent me?" she wondered as she tore the envelope open.

As she read her brow puckered in a frown, there was a lack of understanding in her eyes.

"What does it mean? What has he gone for and where to? Not—not to seek for her? Good heavens, he couldn't be such a fool as that."

"DEAR SHEELA," the letter ran, "I'm going away for a bit, I want to be alone, to do a bit of thinking. Don't worrie about me, I'm all right, look after yourself and have all you want like the place was your own. You're mistress anyway till I come back, I've got to think out the best for every one, including what you said to me to-day, also 'Nid and him too. Yours truley, J. BEVANWOOD."

"Fool!" the woman said. She went to the window and stared out into the grounds. Where had he gone, on what wild, senseless chase? Surely not—not to Paris to look

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for 'Nid and Geoffrey? She stamped her foot with sudden rage. The man was enough to drive her mad. However, he was gone, and, as he had said, she was mistress here till he came back, at any rate—and then probably afterwards. But it would have been more satisfactory to have him here under her influence.

She did not like this breaking away, did not like it at all. "But he will come back soon; the fool will feel lost without me to advise him," she thought.

Jim Bevanwood took quiet possession. It was his own property. He sent Billy Wasser over to Horswood. It was seven miles, but he knew that the boy could trudge it in little over two hours. He had implicit faith in Billy's honesty. He provided Billy with more money than the youth had ever seen in his life.

"You get a bike and come back on it, for one thing," Jim said. "Then you got to 'ave a few things here, Billy, to be comfortable. Git all them things I've writ down—soap and tea and sugar and bread. Then you take this 'ere bit of paper to Saunders, the furnishing shop. We'll make it real comfortable 'ere." He had thought of everything, or as nearly everything as a man can think of when it comes to housekeeping. During the coming days he would realise that for everything he had thought of he had forgotten two other necessary articles, but these were merely details.

Billy was gone with the money and the written instructions, and Jim Bevanwood set to work. He found a battered old pail which he filled at the stream before the front door. He swamped the floor of the sitting-room, then with his large pocket-knife he set to work to trim the creepers and ivy into something like order over the windows and door of his new home—it kept him occu-

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pied. The time flew surprisingly quickly. Presently he heard a cart coming down the white chalk road and he stepped across the stream to the broken-down gate to see what it was. It was Saunders' cart from Horswood bringing him the things he had ordered.

The man driving it was a stranger to him, he to the man. Jim Bevanwood in his shirt-sleeves, his face well blackened from the dust in the ivy and looking generally disreputable, did not suggest Sir James Bevanwood of Bevanwood to the man.

"Hello, mate," he said. "Is this the shanty this stuff is for?"

"I expect so," Jim said. "Bring it in, I'll lend a 'and."

They carried the contents of the cart into the shanty. Two small iron bedsteads with their complement of sheets and blankets, a roll of linoleum, a couple of brooms, two cane-seated chairs, a dozen and one other articles, including a kettle and a good, useful, all-round saucepan.

"Phew!" the man said. "You ain't living in this 'ole, are you, mate?"

"Going to," Jim said, "for a bit. Out of the world, ain't it?"

"Fergotten 'ole, I call it," the man said. "Some people know their own business best," he added thoughtfully. He looked at Jim; he wondered if this man was a criminal hiding from the law which he had outraged. There was nothing very criminal in Jim Bevanwood's appearance.

"'Armless lun-atic, I expect," the man thought as he drove away.

The arrival of the goods gave Jim something more to do. He set to work with the broom; he put up one small iron bedstead in one top room, the other in the

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other. He made the beds as cleverly as a woman might. Sir James Bevanwood, to the manner born, might not have understood the making of a bed. Jim Woods had made his own many a score of times. He had done it for himself, there was nothing strange to him in all this.

Considering its natural drawbacks he had got the place very shipshape when Billy Wasser came back riding his new bicycle and with a sack of provisions slung over his stout little shoulders.

"'Ow's it beginning to look, Billy?" Jim said.

"Fine," the boy said. "You been workin' all right, ain't you? Got the beds up and all. What do you think of the bike?"

"Ripping," Jim said. "'Ow much?"

"Five ten; 'e wanted five and a 'arf guineas. I beat 'im down the five and six and he wouldn't gi' a bell in neither, so I sneaked one."

Jim frowned and shook his head. "You take that there bell back next time you go to Horswood," he said. "Sneakin' ain't the game, Billy."

"But after paying 'im for the bike——" the boy complained.

"You ain't no right to sneak the bell," Jim said. "It ain't right, Billy, it's wrong; you take it back."

Billy looked at his master resentfully, then his face cleared. No one, no child could look resentfully at Jim Bevanwood for long.

"All right, governor, I'll ride over and take it back to-morrow and tell 'im I made a mistake, the dirty 'ound."

For the first time for many months a fire was lighted in the little rusty old kitchen grate. Billy Wasser brought in the wood, of which there was no lack, Jim lighted it, he boiled water and made tea, which they drank without

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milk for the best of all reasons. He fried some bacon and some eggs, which he broke into the pan in masterly fashion.

They sat opposite one another at a small deal table and beamed at one another.

"This is something like," Billy Wasser said. "You ain't 'arf a cook, you ain't, governor."

"I can do a bit that way," Jim said modestly.

After tea Billy washed up and Jim concluded his domestic arrangements.

The sun went down on them, the sweet evening closed in on them. Here in their dell they might have been ten thousand miles away from the world; not a sound came to them but the restless chirping of the birds finding their refuge for the night and the ripple of the stream over the broad stones before the cottage door.

Jim pulled out his pipe and sat down on the doorstep; he lighted his pipe solemnly.

"Bed-time, Billy," he said.

Billy expostulated.

"Bed-time. Early to bed and early to rise," Jim quoted. "And——" He paused. He forgot the rest; it was something concerning an early worm he believed. "Anyway, it's bed-time," he added. So Billy reluctantly went. And Jim sat there while the twilight changed to darkness and the stars came out in the blue vault above him. And presently the great, round, yellow moon rose. And sitting there smoking many pipes, his hands hugging his knees, Jim Bevanwood stared at the stars, seeking inspiration.

"I got to think," he muttered. "Got to think out the best way for 'er and me and every one, Sheila and the rest, but first and before all poor little Kid." He sighed.

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"Poor little kid! It isn't as if she ever loved me that way, like a wife, nor ever could, she did not prop'ly understand. Just a kid, that's all she was. Adopted——" He paused with a wry smile. He remembered what his mates at the works had said. "'Ave you adopted her, Jim Woods?" And he had said he had.

"So that's about it," he muttered. "I—a-dopted 'er, and I got to see 'er through, poor little 'Nid. There's ways out and ways out," he muttered. "The—the way she—she spoke about." He shuddered. "Only it 'ud 'urt 'Nid, 'urt 'er terrible. She 'ates anythink like that and it 'ud be in the papers and she'd get spoke about. I don't like that way. There's another way." He stared at the great round moon. There was another way, and loving her as he did with the great, unselfish love of a big heart, that other way, terrible as it was, did not seem impossible to him.

It would free her without shame, without scandal. And then she could marry this man, the man she had chosen. It did not strike him that he was contemplating any great sacrifice, he just wanted to think out the best thing for 'Nid. Might not this be the best thing?

He knocked out his pipe presently. Billy Wasser had been asleep many hours. Jim crept up the creaky stairs to his room and lay down on the bed.

"I ain't going to do nothink in a 'urry," he said. "It's 'urrying as spoils everything. I've got to think it out. I'd be sorry for many things, sorry to——" He paused. "Oh, God," he whispered. "God, it's a beautiful world you made for us—yet if it's the best way—for 'er——" And then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XX

THE ROAD HOME

THE dainty little shoes were very ragged, the pretty dress was heavy with the chalk dust from the white, winding, never-ending roads. She trudged on. She had left the sea behind her, the sea she had loved and yearned for; now she felt a kind of horror of it. As she walked on in the burning sunshine she shivered now and again, shivered as though with the cold. She had made a mistake, a big mistake, and had not realised it till—till he had caught her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, and she had seen that something, in his eyes. Then something—something seemed to go wrong with her world, with her thoughts.

"He—he was horrible," she said. She said it aloud. "Horrible." She shuddered. "I didn't know, I thought he was different. I s'pose, come to that, they are all alike—horrible." She shuddered again and stooped to pick a wild flower. She looked at it for a moment and then threw it away. She was not thinking of it at all.

"I s'pose," she muttered, "I'm a bit different to other girls, to them—to those who worked at the Snowflake. I didn't never seem to understand 'em. Now I think I know why—perhaps I am wrong and they are right, I don't know." She paused. She sat down on the bank beside the road and looked down at her ragged little feet.

The Road Home

How far had she walked? She had not the faintest idea. It was not last night, nor yet the night before that she had broken away from the hotel by the sea, that was three nights ago now, and since then she had plodded on and on. She had no money, not a penny. A woman in a farmhouse had given her her first breakfast, had invited her to stay if she liked and do some housework. 'Nid had stayed the better part of the day, earned her dinner, and had then set out again. Her first idea had been London and the Snowflake again; then she had put it out of her mind. She did not feel inclined to exchange the country for the smoky town, she hated the town.

No, she would not go to London. Then where? And then she remembered a little broken-down, half-ruined cottage in a dip of the Downs, a stream that ran musically before a broken doorway. And remembering, she grew homesick, homesick for the place.

Why not go there? She could go there. Of course, when she reached there she would not be able to stay without food or money, or bed or anything. Still it was something definite, it was a goal to be won.

So she trudged on, taking many a wrong road, sometimes getting farther and still farther from her destination and then picking up the road again. And so the days had passed; she had slept out under a stack one night, in an empty barn another.

There was no hurry, but it was comforting to know she had some object in view. Sooner or later she would find the little cottage in the hollow of the Downs. But yet there was no haste.

People were good to her on her way. There is no

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more open-hearted peasantry in the world than that which finds its living on the rolling South Downs.

To-night at sunset she tapped on the door of a cottage; a woman with a baby in her arms came out and stared at her.

"Well, my girl?" she said.

"I'm hungry," 'Nid said quietly; "couldn't you give me some work to do, anything just for something to eat?"

"Come inside," the woman said.

'Nid dragged her weary little feet into the cottage room. The table was laid for a meal.

"Sit you down; you've come a long way."

'Nid nodded. "And I'm tired and hungry, yet I can work. I can scrub and clean or do a bit of washing for you—that's what I'm best at, washing."

"Where do you sleep at night?" the woman asked.

"Oh, sleeping don't matter—anywhere," 'Nid said. "I slept under a stack and in a barn; a hedge is good enough. One can always sleep. It isn't that, it's getting something to eat now and again."

The door opened and a man came out. He looked at 'Nid.

"'Oo is it?" he said briefly.

His wife explained.

"She be welcome," he said briefly. He sat down to the table and took the baby from the woman. He nursed it while she laid the meal. He never spoke to 'Nid, hardly looked at her. He had said she was welcome and that, so far as he was concerned, ended the matter.

Cold boiled bacon and good bread and butter and a cup of tea made a meal for 'Nid. When it was over she asked for the work she was to do.

"There's no work," the man said. "You're welcome to

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what you had. It ain't much, but there it is. Them as ain't got much ain't got much to give. You're going? Good-night."

She moved to the door; the darkness had settled down, the stars were out.

"Where are you sleeping to-night?" the woman asked her again.

"Anywhere, it don't matter," 'Nid said. "Only I would have worked willingly for you to make up——"

"That's all right—well——"

"Is it far to Horswood?" 'Nid asked suddenly.

"Horswood, don't know it. Jack," she called, "how fur is it to Horswood?"

"Horswood?" He came to the door. "Horswood? I know a Horswood——" He paused. "It's miles and miles, it's back of Chichester somewhere, past Little 'Ampton and Arundel—oh, miles, twenty, thirty maybe I know of 'Orswood as I used to court a gel whose people come from there——" He paused and looked at his wife.

"Good-night," he said abruptly and turned back into the cottage.

And so 'Nid started on her journey again.

Miles—and miles—and miles. She slept under a hedge that night and woke in the yellow primrose of the dawn. She bathed before the world was awake in a stream that turned a great moss-grown millwheel.

Yokels going very, very early to their work might have had something to tell about for the rest of their days had they seen the little slim white figure on the bank of the stream. Who in Sussex does not believe in the fairies and the nymphs and dryads that come out of the woods, and mermaids that come out of the foam?

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But no one saw 'Nid, and so local superstition did not get the fillip it might have secured. She dressed herself in her dust-heavy clothes and stepped out again on the white road. But she had cast the worn-out shoes behind her for ever and henceforth went barefooted.

Miles and miles and miles. She often lost her way and went a day's journey in the wrong direction, but it did not matter. Sooner or later she would find the cottage down in the dell. Not yet, not for weeks, perhaps, months maybe—it all depended on Fate. There was no hurry, none in the world.

When a big town lay directly in her route she made a wide detour to avoid it. It cost her many miles, but she must avoid the big towns. People might look questioningly at her little bare feet in the big towns. Out here on the Downs where the soft grass was good to walk on it did not matter, but the pavements of the towns would hurt these small feet of hers, just as did the flints when, perforce, she must travel by the road, so the tender skin was cut and bruised; and sometimes because the pain was so great she had to rest long hours by the way.

Still she crept on, making slowly to her goal, missing her way, taking many extra miles to avoid what she did not wish to meet.

To-day she lay out on the soft green turf with the golden sunshine about her. Below her lay Lewes; she could see the great, square, ugly prison, but did not know what it was. So, too, could she see the ruins of Lewes' ancient castle. Great fights have been fought here, noble deeds done in the old far-off days. There are relics of those battles still to be found out here on the green Downs, if one but seeks for them, some rust-eaten scrap of metal that once might have been sword or spear-

The Road Home

head or a fragment of some warrior's head-piece. Gal-lant, stirring times has the old castle seen, but now it stands in its decay overlooking the most peaceful valley in all the green south country. Eastward the hills fall to the valley of the Ouse, that dull brown river that flows sluggishly to the sea; there in the valley good Sussex cattle feed in the low meadows where the grass grows so thick and green. And then the broken hills claim their own again and rise to even greater heights, their sides in many a place scarred by the cliffs of chalk that gleam whitely in the sun's light.

And now, breaking on the peace and stillness of it all, comes a discordant note, the shrill scream of an engine. With a puff of white smoke the train comes crawling through the valley, and so passes on its way to Newhaven and the sea, and presently is gone, leaving behind it a floating trail of white, and once again the valley is given over to the red cattle and the brown river and silence.

A shepherd tending his flocks told her her way. Brighton lay directly west; to avoid it she must strike across the Downs and come out at Clayton, then take the road under the Downs beyond Poynings to Edburton and Beeding. Horswood he had never heard of, but if it was Chichester way she would be all right if she kept on due west; and keeping the Downs between her and the sea she would avoid the towns such as Brighton and Worthing.

She slept that night in the base of a ruined windmill and lay listening to the rats that played about near her, but she was not afraid. She was only tired and very, very supremely in need of rest, and in spite of the burning, throbbing pain of her feet, she slept serenely and

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undisturbed and woke to another brilliant day, another long day of journeying. And she had kept no count of the days that had passed. She did not know whether it was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or any other day in the week.

Sometimes she was very, very hungry, sometimes it hurt her to go unwashed for lack of water, and there were but few dew-ponds on the Downs. Once in a cottage a woman gave her an old pair of shoes in pity for her small, bare, wounded feet and that helped her much, though the shoes were large and clumsy and often she had to stop to collect one that had dropped by the way.

"Horswood?" a man said—it was in the glow of the sunset. She had come on him tying faggots in a coppice. He paused and straightened his back and lifted a hairy, brawny arm.

"Horswood, it's about six miles," he said.

So she was near the end of her long, long journey now, very near, only six miles and then seven more to the cottage, and then—what? But her thoughts did not go beyond the cottage; perhaps she would shelter there, lie down and rest. She was so tired now.

She looked back. The man had started tying his faggots again. He had made a fire and the blue smoke was curling up against the brown-purple background of trees.

Presently the man bundled his last faggot, bound it and flung it aside, then straightened himself and picked up his earthenware jar and his basket and trudged away into the coming night. And 'Nid crept back. She dragged the bundles of faggots together and made a little shelter. There was a suggestion of companionship in the fire, even though it was nearly out. Then she lay

The Road Home

down and slept, and woke in the bright sunshine of the early morning and crept out of her shelter to see the rabbits playing.

She watched them as they sat up and cleaned themselves with their paws. They saw her and turned large, liquid, wondering eyes on her and wrinkled their funny little noses at her, then with a whisk of a white tail they were gone, and she laughed, for even the rabbits were something and she was very, very lonely.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BRAMBLE

NEVER had a man contemplated self-destruction in a calmer, saner and more impersonal manner than Jim Bevanwood did. His mind was entirely serene. The step into the unknown did not fill him with dread. The only question he must finally decide for himself was whether it would be better for 'Nid. It was just 'Nid he was thinking of. She had made a mistake when she married him, or rather the mistake had been his.

He had always known that 'Nid had not desired to marry him, but he had extracted the promise to do so from her and she had kept it. That 'Nid could do anything else than keep a promise was impossible. And now the question was whether it would not be a great deal better for 'Nid if he ceased to exist.

He did not sit down and mope over it; on the contrary, he rose early. He set to work cleaning out the cottage. He let Billy Wasser sleep on—"Kids want more sleep than us grown up 'uns," he thought. So he got the pail and filled it at the stream and "slooshed"—as he called it—out the little sitting-room kitchen, making it in a rare muddle. Then with the hard new broom he drove the water out over the door-sill. He took his knife and again trimmed the creepers into something like order, and all the time he whistled to himself. Any one to see him would fancy that he was utterly care free.

The Bramble

"If she loves 'im and 'e 'er," he thought, "I'm only in the way, she can't marry 'im with me about. It's just that, I'm in the way. I ain't pertickler wanted, never was. I expect Billy 'ud miss me a bit. I got an idea—I'll make a will and leave this 'ere place to Billy. He'd like it, 'e's a good little kid. That reminds me, 'e's got to take that bell back to Horswood to-day." Jim shook his head. "Stealing ain't no good, not even if you calls it nicking. Nicking and stealing, it's just the same thing, only different names. I wonder where she is now and how she's enjoying 'erself? Of course, 'im knowing all about books and poets and all that, she's bound to be more interested in 'im than in a chap like me. I didn't never ought to 'ave married 'Nid, I ought to 'ave known I wasn't 'er sort. A-dopted 'er, that's about what I done. Come out of it." He hacked out a great thick bramble that grew straight across one of the little iron-framed windows.

"That'll let in a bit more light and air—that's what is wanted, light and air," Jim muttered. "Strikes me I'm somethink like this bramble, big and strong and ugly, growing straight across the light, getting in every one's way, shutting out the sunshine."

He nodded his head. "Shutting the sunshine out of 'er life, that's about it."

He pursed his lips up and began to whistle in a hopelessly tuneless way.

"There, it's gone now and the sun shines in through the window and it'll dry the floor and make the place smell sweeter. That's it, if a thing's in the way, 'ack it out." He nodded his head. His existence and that of the bramble seemed synonymous. As the branch had shut the light and air out of the little kitchen, so he was

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shutting the light and air out of 'Nid's life. He gone, the sun could shine in on her, she would be free and happy, she could marry the man of her choice.

Jim Bevanwood sighed. He ceased work for a time and stood leaning against the doorpost and stared at the sparkling stream. Just where he saw it it ran through a bed of thickly growing green stuff—ground elder, cow parsley, golden dandelions and kingcups, starlike daisies and blue forget-me-nots, the broad leaved dock and the deeper green of the stinging nettles. Through all this the stream ran, a silver thread, here and there flashing into gold where the sun filtered through the over-arching trees and caught the ripple of the water.

"All this," Jim said. It came to him that this earth was a very sweet and lovely place, a good place to live in. He had not the slightest desire to die, but there was 'Nid to consider.

"One thing," he muttered; "she ain't got to think I done it for her sake, that 'ud worry 'er. I got to find some way of finishing it up so's she nor any one will ever guess."

That was the trouble—he had not a mind given to cunning and scheming.

"There's got to be an accident," he muttered. But could one meet with an accident in such a place as this? If the stream was but a river, deep and flowing fast—but no man, unless he was helplessly intoxicated, could find death by drowning in such a trickle as this. Jim sighed; he looked perplexed.

"S'posing there was rats 'ere?" he thought. "S'posing Billy was to get me somethink for 'em and I made a mistake—it's been done before." The idea seemed a good one to him, his imagination could not achieve anything

The Bramble

better. Rat poison and a mistake and then 'Nid would be free, the bramble would be removed and the sunlight would stream in on her.

"That's about it," Jim thought.

Billy Wasser with sleepy eyes stood before him. "I thought you'd got some one 'ere," he said. "'Eard you muttering and a-talking to some one." He looked about him.

"I were talking to myself," Jim said. "Billy Wasser, you ain't washed yourself."

"Didn't 'ave no water," Billy said.

Jim pointed to the stream. "You jest off with your clothes and woller in it," he said.

Billy demurred, but eventually did as he was bidden. He stripped and rolled on the warm stones in the bed of the brook and the shining water rippled over him. Billy Wasser was not beautiful, but stripped and with his skin sparkling with water drops he seemed to fit into the picture.

Meanwhile Jim went in and prepared breakfast. When he and Billy were seated, one at each end of the table, Jim stared hard at Billy. He was trying to say something, the saying of which was difficult. He turned red and hesitated, opened his mouth and shut it.

As a liar Jim Bevanwood did not shine, he told a lie but rarely and always with a sense of self-consciousness.

"Billy," Jim said.

"Yes?"

"'Ow about rats?" Jim said.

"Ah," Billy said. "Water rats?"

Jim grasped at the chance. "Yes," he said; "water rats, bound to be water rats in a place like this, I—I fancy I see one this morning."

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"Very likely," Billy said.

"We did ought to do somethink about 'em," Jim said. "Next they'll be stealing our food."

Billy nodded. "'Ow about shooting 'em? Shooting with an air-gun? Where I got the bike they sell air-guns." His eyes glinted with eagerness.

Jim shook his head. "Poison's the best for them," he said, getting to his subject.

"You'd get some sport with an air-gun," Billy said; "and you won't with no poison."

"Poison," Jim said decidedly. "That's what it's got to be. I ain't no shot with a air-gun, Billy. You're going to Horswood about that bell this morning."

"I s'pose so," Billy grunted. "I'll pay for it, and tell the man as I took it by mistake."

"No," Jim said; "you tell 'im the truth, say you nicked it and you are sorry and 'ave come to pay for it. You done a wrong thing stealing it, Billy; you ain't going to put it right by telling no lies about——" He paused suddenly. Was he not as great a liar as Billy, even worse? Had he not stated that he thought he had seen a rat when he knew he had seen nothing of the kind?

"And then you get the rat poison," Jim said.

Billy nodded.

It was done. Jim drew a sigh of relief. He felt pleased with himself at the cunning and cleverness he had displayed. Billy Wasser had not the slightest idea in the world that he, Jim Bevanwood, was bent on self-destruction. 'Nid would never know, no one would ever guess.

"Billy," Jim said, "I s'pose there's all sorts of shops in Horswood?"

"Yes, a good few."

The Bramble

"I been thinking," Jim said, "I been thinking, Billy, now I got property and like that, I did ought to make a will. Life's uncertain——" He stared out of the window to avoid seeing Billy. "Life's very uncertain. In the midst of life you are in death——" He had heard that somewhere. "Billy, I been thinking I ought to make a will——" He paused and looked at Billy anxiously, wondering if Billy's suspicions would be aroused now, but Billy went on with his eating.

"That's it, a will," Jim said. "Some of them shops sells forms printed—'This is my last will and testyment.' You try and get me one of them forms, Billy, it 'ud be a help."

Billy nodded; the matter seemed of very slight importance to him.

Half an hour later Billy mounted his bicycle and rode away to Horswood.

"Don't forget about the rat stuff and the will," Jim called after him. Billy waved and vanished in a cloud of chalk dust from the road.

"That's all right," Jim said to himself. He smiled pleasantly as one who has achieved his purpose by great cleverness and cunning.

He would have everything he had in the world left to 'Nid, except this cottage, and that was for Billy. Then there would be an accident in which the rat poison would play a part and so the matter would be comfortably concluded. He felt as a man feels who has had a great weight lifted from his shoulders. He had nothing further to trouble himself about, the bramble would soon be removed.

And now, with nothing on his mind, Jim Bevanwood whistled as he worked about the little place. He had

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hammer, nails, saw, plane, and a chisel. There was much to be done—the old door to take down, mend and re-hang, the windows to see to, a dozen and one other things. He whistled cheerily as he worked. Since he was going to leave the cottage to Billy he must see that it was put into something like order.

That morning Jim enjoyed himself thoroughly. He had nothing on his mind. He had decided and he had prepared the means for carrying out his ideas, therefore he had nothing to worry him and he did not worry.

"I'd 'a liked to 'ave made a neat little bridge over the stream to the door," he thought, "only I s'pose I shan't 'ave time—and then 'ow about a porch? A porch 'ud look well with some of them wild things climbing over it and it 'ud be nice to sit in when the evening comes." But it would not be for him, he would need no porch to sit in. Billy and Billy's children might sit in the porch, though. Billy's wife would find it useful, she could sit here in the porch and knit or sew and watch Billy's children. Then when Billy came home from work she could daintily pick her way across the rustic bridge to meet Billy.

Jim's eyes glistened—Billy was a lucky fellow. If only he and 'Nid——. He gave himself an angry jerk. He was a fool to think about such things. 'Nid had never cared for him, somehow she had always been frightened of him. Very likely she would be a bit sorry when she heard about that accident, the mistake he had made concerning the rat poison.

Of course he would not do it at once, he would have to wait a few days. If he made a mistake about the rat poison immediately Billy bought it people might suspect. That would not do. A few days more or less would not

The Bramble

matter and he had set his mind on the porch and the bridge. How would it be if he completed the porch and got the bridge almost done—not quite? A man would not go and kill himself when he was half-way through a job; the fact that he had not quite finished the bridge would remove the last vestige of suspicion. But all the same, he might have all the timbers ready cut and everything ready to put into place so that even Billy himself might complete it.

Jim Bevanwood began to feel a new respect for himself. He had never guessed what a really deep and cunning rascal he was. Here he was plotting and planning to throw dust into the eyes of a suspicious police and public with all the craft and cunning of a finished criminal. He laughed to himself joyously.

As he was going to make the great sacrifice he might as well make it with a good heart. It was for 'Nid's sake, it was to make her life happier, it was to remove the bramble that obstructed the sunlight and air. What better use could he make of his life than to lay it down to bring happiness to the woman he loved with all the generosity of a heart utterly without selfishness?

CHAPTER XXII

JIM FACES FAILURE

BILLY came back white as any miller, covered with the chalky dust from the Downs road. He had paid for the bell and had a wordy warfare with the vendor of it. "Told him off," he said to Jim.

"I 'ope you told the truth and said you was sorry about it," Jim said.

Billy nodded.

"And 'ow about them other things?" Jim said with a fine affectation of indifference. "Let's see, what were they? Oh, rat poison and—and a will form, wasn't it?"

"'Ere's the form—threepence," Billy said. "It's got bits printed and the rest you got to fill in and get some one to witness it."

"You'll do that for me, Billy?" Jim said.

"And the man said as 'ow the person as witnessed it must not be one going to get anything by the will," Billy said.

"Oh!" Jim's jaw dropped. "I meant you to 'ave this cottage, Billy," he said. "I suppose you won't be able to 'ave it if you was to sign your name."

"The carter could sign, 'e passes three times a week; 'e'll be along to-morrow—Nick Wickens 'is name is."

"Then you watch out for him to-morrow, Billy, and bring 'im 'ere," Jim said. "I'd like you to 'ave the cottage."

Jim Faces Failure

Billy nodded. He was not excited at the prospect.

"What about the other thing, the—the poison, wasn't it?" Jim asked.

"Oh, ah!" Billy brought out a packet from his shabby pocket. He laid it on the table and Jim's heart sank. He had hoped for something in a bottle—bottles are so easily mistaken one for another in the darkness. What was this that Billy had brought? He opened it and found a pot, inside the pot was a very small quantity of some vile, sticky, dirty brown, evil-smelling stuff.

"What's this?" Jim asked.

"Rat poison—you got to put it on bread and leave it about and the rats get it."

"Couldn't you 'a got something in a bottle?" Jim asked.

Billy shook his head. "No, this is all they got," he said. "Besides, they say it only 'urts rats. If chickens and dogs get 'old of it it don't 'urt 'em."

Jim felt a sense of sickening disappointment, of personal loss. His plan had failed. The rat poison would not hurt him. If chickens and dogs could partake of it with impunity of what earthly use would it be to him? He must think again. Anyhow, he had the will form, he could carry out the first part of his programme.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH 'NID COMES HOME

A LITTLE figure came wearily over the hills. It could scarcely drag one small foot after the other. Now it stopped; it sat down on the short turf under the shadow of a clump of gorse and wept weakly, for it was very, very tired and hungry and lonely.

For an hour it sat there while the sun slowly dipped towards the west, behind the gaunt skeleton of the ruined mill which lifted but two of its once four sails as in dumb surrender to the all-conquering victor, Time.

'Nid sat there on the soft grass, the tears dropped slowly down her face, she was very, very tired, but she knew her journey's end was very near now. Another mile or but little more and she would have reached her goal; she would come down the valley to the little cottage—her refuge and her retreat—and there she would stay. She would just lie down somewhere beside the stream and sleep—sleep, perhaps God would be merciful and let her sleep on always.

She wanted to sleep now, but she fought off the desire. She was so near her goal, just a little more courage, a little more strength and it would be won, and then—rest—sleep, forgetfulness, and one day the children coming to the cottage would find her sleeping there.

She rose slowly and staggered along on the green grass. The sun was low and deeply red in the sky. But she did not look back. Before her the hill dropped away, she

In Which 'Nid Comes Home

could see the narrow, winding, white road that ran through the valley—that road would take her to the dell and the old cottage and rest.

Again and again as she made down the steep bank of the hillside she stumbled and fell on to her hands and knees—she was very weak, very tired.

But the road was gained at last; the sun had gone down, the sweet twilight was over all. High up in the heavens a lark was singing his last song to the departing day; some sheep paused for an instant from their eternal cropping of the grass to look at her with mild-eyed interest.

She gained the road—it was hot and dry to her little bare feet, it dipped to the valley. She was very near now. Beside the road a shining stream ran, she knew it for the same stream that ran before the door of the cottage. The road dipped and dipped and her weary little feet had carried her down to the bottom of the valley now. She must turn to the left and in a few moments she would see it—the place she had prayed for, the home she was seeking. It would be an empty home without food, with no friendly, welcoming hands to help her in.

Thick green stuff brushed her bare ankles, so cool to the touch of her tired little hot feet. So she pushed her way slowly through the growth of years, past the broken gate by the stream, and she saw the cottage before her and the door stood open, and in the doorway a man stood smoking, his bare arms folded across his chest.

'Nid stood still, the man did not move. Across the stream they looked at one another, and then he moved. Slowly, as with an effort, he came splashing across the stream to her and took her hand.

"'Nid!" he said, "'Nid!"

CHAPTER XXIV

WHAT HE DID

HE put no questions to her, he just accepted her return as a fact. It was 'Nid come back again—'Nid disillusioned very likely, 'Nid worn out, tired to death, with a terribly weary, pathetic look in her pretty eyes, her little bare feet sore and lacerated by the flinty roads.

He took her by the hand, he led her silently into the cottage, he forced her gently into a seat. Speech seemed useless to him, he had nothing to say. He would not question her. She had come back and he must do his best for her.

It seemed to his honest, simple mind that it was the most natural thing in the world that 'Nid, weary and disillusioned, heart-broken, perhaps deceived and abandoned, should come to him for comfort and protection. That was what he was for, to comfort and protect her.

Simple minded and honest as he was, he was not utterly ignorant of the world. He knew of men and men's vices; he knew of men who sought a thing only to play with it for a time, then break and crush it and fling it away. He did not doubt but that was what this man had done. 'Nid had attracted him, he had lured her away, she had amused him for a time, then he had tired of her and abandoned her. So 'Nid had come back to him again.

He busied himself about the place; he prepared a meal, he boiled a kettle on some sticks in the fireplace. He

What He Did

made her tea, he set a feast for her, and all in silence, for he was tongue-tied. He did not know what to say, he felt that it would be out of place for him to offer her pity. Certainly he never thought of offering her blame.

"Jim, why are you doing this for me?" she said.

"Why?" He turned to her. "You're hungry and tired, ain't you, 'Nid?"

"Yes, yes, oh, yes," she said with a sob in her voice. "So tired." She paused. "It's been a long, long way, Jim. I didn't think to find you here."

"No," he said, "I s'pose not. You never know what's waiting for you at the journey's end, do you? Now don't talk, eat a bit and then you'll rest."

She ate a little, not much. Now and again she looked at him with a kind of wonder in her eyes. Was he a man that he could treat her like this? It seemed to 'Nid just now that plain, honest Jim Bevanwood was more angel than man. She had treated him badly, had shamed him, had done the worst thing a woman could do. She had run away from him with another man; she shuddered at the memory of it. And she looked at him, at his plain, honest, good face, and she felt she worshipped him for his goodness to her.

She was too weary to think, to wonder how he came to be here. He was here, here to welcome her, and that was all that mattered. She felt like a little child overtired come home to a mother's loving care. Jim was like that to her, almost womanly in his tenderness for her. Presently he led her upstairs to the tiny bedroom under the eaves—his own.

There he left her. Billy Wasser was away in the town on his bicycle. He had gone to buy some necessaries. Jim was glad, he wanted to be alone. His brain moved

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slowly, he could not think when there were others by talking to him perhaps. He went to the door and stared out into the twilight. He sucked at his empty pipe and thought deeply.

'Nid had come back—he knew why, he saw the whole pitiful little tragedy. Poor, foolish, innocent little 'Nid! She had allowed herself to become the plaything of a man. He had tired of her, flung her aside, so—bruised and broken—she had come crawling home to him. Poor child, poor little one!

"Now I understand," he muttered. "It wasn't meant as I should do what I thought of doing. It's him, not me! Him!" He clenched his great hands. "Him, I got to find him! I'll find him. There's plenty of time, and when I do find him!" Jim Bevanwood smiled to himself. He knew what he should do when he found that man. He held out his great strong hands, he opened and closed them, looked at them, admiring their strength. Those hands of his would have work to do one day when he and that man met.

Standing here in the absolute stillness he could hear her gentle, regular breathing through the tiny window above. She was asleep. And that reminded him that there were other things to do for her, always for her.

He stooped and pulled off his boots; he crept noiselessly up the narrow stairs; he gathered her clothes together in a bundle and brought them down, never once glancing towards the bed on which the sleeping girl lay.

Just as the darkness settled down Billy Wasser came back on his bicycle. He found the little kitchen filled with steam, a fire burning in the grate and Jim hard at work. Billy opened his eyes.

"Well," he said. "Started to take in washing?"

What He Did

"That's about it," Jim said briefly. He went on grimly with his work. He rubbed and scrubbed with his shirt-sleeves turned back over his bare arms, and Billy looked on interestedly.

"Why, them things," he said suddenly, "they bain't yours!"

"Never said they was," Jim said. "Look 'ere, Billy, you keep your mouth shut and don't go whistling and making a row, and don't go into my room, there's somebody there."

"Somebody!" Billy opened his eyes widely. "'Oo, Jim?" he asked.

"Never you mind—a lady, that's 'oo!" Jim said. "And I'm doing a bit of washing for 'er, so mind you don't kick up a shine, Billy, my lad. Get your supper and 'op it off to bed," he added.

Billy got his supper. Now and again he stared at Jim, at his labours. Billy wanted to laugh. The idea of Sir James Bevanwood busy at the washtub! If he told people they wouldn't believe him. But Billy was loyal, he had no intention of telling any one. He sat there stuffing stolidly.

"When you done, you 'op it," Jim said.

Billy had done presently, and he hopped it.

"Good-night, Jim!" he said.

"'Night, Billy!" The perspiration was running down Jim's face, but he built up the fire with more sticks till it roared in the chimney.

He took the clothes he had washed and rinsed them out in the stream; he wrung them out tenderly and carefully, and brought them back and hung them to dry by the fire.

The night was far advanced when Jim's toils were over.

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He had no iron—he wished he had. He could not iron the things, but he did his best. He stretched them carefully between his hands and held them closer to the fire at risk of scorching them.

“Billy can get over to Horswood and get more things for ‘er to-morrow,” he thought. It did not strike him that he was acting foolishly, that if people ever came to hear of what he had done they would laugh at him. The bathos of the situation never entered his head. His wife had proved false, disloyal, had smirched his honour and her own, had been cast off by the man she had fled with and had come back to him—and he had set to work to wash her clothes for her. It seemed stupid, but not to him, to him it was just the natural thing for him to do.

And now the night was well nigh spent, the flush of dawn was creeping up in the sky over the Downs. Jim went out and drew a long breath.

’Nid had come back to him, somehow the dawn seemed more beautiful to him than it had been yesterday. Yesterday he had not counted on seeing many more dawns, to-day it was different. He knew somehow that his life was valuable to ’Nid, otherwise she would not have come back to him.

He could not rest, he felt no need of sleep, there was still much to do. He cleared the room, removing all traces of his labour. He laid the table for the morning meal, he put everything in readiness, then he folded the clothes and carried them up to her room. For the first time he looked at her sleeping with the faint flush of the primrose dawn on her childish face. She looked such a child sleeping here with her long hair all about her face on the pillow. He had never seen her like this before.

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He stood looking at her now and his heart was filled with a great pity for her.

"Poor little kid!" he muttered. He pitied her as he might have pitied a child who had hurt herself and come to him for comfort.

He went quietly out of the room and to Billy's room. It was early, but it did not matter. He touched Billy on the shoulder, finally he shook Billy into wakefulness.

"You got to get up, Billy Wasser, and if you make a sound I'll give you somethink!" Jim said.

Billy nodded, his eyes dazed by sleep.

"You get dressed quiet, and come down," Jim said.

He himself went down, he looked about and found a stub of pencil and a piece of paper. On the paper he wrote: "Turn to the left outside the door and foller the streme about half a mile, and then you come to a pool deep enuff to baithe in. Shall come back later, JIM."

He remembered 'Nid's fondness for bathing. She would be glad of the opportunity now. He cut a thick hunch of bread and plastered it with butter, he drew a glass of water from the well.

"Set down and eat that!" he said to Billy Wasser. "You got to go to Horswood for some things I want!"

"It be too early," Billy said.

"Never you mind, you can take your time," Jim said.

"Is—is she—the woman you spoke of—still 'ere?" Billy said.

"She is, and she's stopping, Billy——" Jim paused. "Billy, you're a good lad, I trust you, you ain't one to talk, you just say nothing, Billy, about anything, see?"

Billy nodded. "Not me," he said. "I'll keep my mouth shut, Jim."

"Good boy," Jim said.

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"And about them things I got to get at Horswood?" Billy asked, when he had finished his bread-and-butter. Jim frowned.

That was the trouble, what was Billy to get? He did not know.

"Stand up, Billy," he said.

Billy stood up obediently. Jim measured him with his eye.

"She ain't a wonderful deal taller'n you and slimmer'n you, Billy," he said.

"Then she's only a kid," Billy said, disgustedly.

"That's what she is, only a kid," Jim said. "Look 'ere, you go to Horswood, you go and find some woman in a shop where they sell women's close, see? Just tell 'er you want things for a girl not much taller'n you and slim—slim built. Tell her that, Billy, say you want——" He paused. "Well, everything. She'll know better'n you nor me. Close and boots and a 'at and other things, the usual things. Say you want two or three of everything and a dress or two, somethink light, whitey kind of dress, or pink——" Jim paused. "Somethink as 'ud fit you if you was, say a inch taller and a bit thinner, Billy." He paused. "Get 'old of some woman and she'll know. If she asks questions say——" Jim paused. "Well, don't tell 'er no lies, Billy, say it's some one as 'as turned up unexpectedly and 'as pretty near run out of close, see?"

"And 'ow am I to bring 'em back, Jim?" Billy asked.

"Bring 'em back?" Jim said. "Why, you jest bring 'em back, that's all. 'Ire a cart if you can't manage without, only don't let the cart come 'ere. Unload at the road, and 'ere's money." That was another question—how much money would Billy need? Jim produced a

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five pound note. He hesitated and produced another. Billy was honest as the day.

"You pay for everything and you can tell me all about it when you get 'ome," he said. "Now 'op it."

Billy was gone, and Jim sat there alone. Once he went to the foot of the stairs and listened, he heard her deep, regular breathing and he smiled. It was as it should be, the poor, tired little soul was taking her fill of sleep.

Jim went out, he went down the valley and climbed the steep bank of the Downs. He climbed till he was high up. A lark was singing overhead, a faint smell of the distant sea was borne to him on the light wind. Far away to the right the white sails of a mill turned lazily in the breeze. Mingled with the smell of the sea was the smell of gorse and of the sun-warmed turf.

Looking down he could see below the thatched roof of the cottage. He could follow the silver thread of the stream, except here and there where it was lost among the greenery. He could see the lonely white, winding road down which just now Billy Wasser had 'opped it on his bicycle.

"That's it," Jim muttered. "That's it."

What it was he scarcely knew, but somehow things seemed to be just as they should be—that was what he meant by "That's it."

She had come back, tired and worn, bruised and bleeding—poor little soul. She had come back for his care and protection. The world would have it that she was his wife, but she was not, she was just 'Nid—his kid, the kid he had adopted. And she found after all that she needed him, she could not manage without him.

He lay there on his back on the green turf and watched

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the fleecy clouds slowly scudding across the deep blue of the sky.

And the man—one day he would go out and seek the man. Meanwhile his first thought must be for 'Nid. He must arrange everything for her. When he and that man met it would mean the end of things for him. It would be both their lives, the man's first and then his—his demanded of the law. Well, that was as it should be.

"If you take the law into your own 'ands you got to pay for it," Jim muttered. "All right, I'll pay, I'm willing to pay, but not yet, I got to fix 'er up first. There's time, plenty of time. I ain't going chasing round the world for 'im, sooner or later he'll come back to me, that's what I'll wait for, 'im coming back to me, bound to. And that's when the time'll be, when he comes back."

Out here under the sky with the hum of the insects in his ears, with the scent of the sea and gorse and grass with him, Jim fell asleep. A passer-by chancing to see him as he slept would have looked in vain for any signs of passion, of revenge, of some sworn vendetta. There was a smile on the rugged face, the man asleep looked at peace with all the world. So he was, with the exception of 'one man who, when the time came, he would kill remorselessly and without passion, kill as a simple act of justice.

CHAPTER XXV

"MAY I STAY?"

'NID woke in the sunshine of the little room. She stretched her still aching limbs in luxurious ease and opened her eyes. Then she lay wondering. She looked at whitened walls, broken in a score of places, at a bare floor. She saw her own clothes neatly folded on a cane chair beside the bed.

Where was she? How had she come here? Then she remembered. She had come back, Jim was here. Jim had welcomed her last night, had brought her in, had fed her and had brought her to rest. Her eyes filled with tears, she did not deserve this from him. She rose and looked in sheer wonder at her clothes. She saw what had happened, the dust had been shaken out of her dress, her underclothing had all been washed clean. She knew who had done it and a sob broke from her labouring breast and the tears started into her eyes.

It was like Jim, so like him. What a wonderful Jim it was. She tried to laugh, but only the tears came. She dressed and went down, the little place was silent and empty, for a moment she felt afraid—afraid lest Jim had deserted her. Then she saw the scrawled note on the table left for her.

That again was like him, he would remember how she loved to bathe. She followed his directions, she went out and turned to the left and followed the stream till she came to the bathing pool.

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She slipped off her clothes and stood a slender, white, almost boyish figure on the bank, then a plunge and she was in. The cool water rippled over her head. She could swim, she had learned swimming in the baths in London, she swam like a mermaid. The pool was not wide, nor was it very deep, but many minutes passed before 'Nid emerged, dripping and flushed from the exercise.

Now she took a sunbath that seemed to warm her through and through to her very heart. She lay on the green bank and stretched her limbs. It seemed to her now that when she had plunged into the pool she had cleansed herself of the past, of all the misery, the misunderstanding, the folly of it. She was clean and whole again in soul and mind and body.

What should she tell him when she saw him? What could she say to him, how could she try and thank him for his wonderful goodness to her? She almost hoped that he would question her. She had so much to tell him, so much that she could not tell him unless he questioned her. Would he? She wondered and hoped he would. If only he would, then she would tell him all, tell him how foolishly, wickedly wrong she had been, tell him of how a knowledge of her folly and foolishness had come to her in time, how she had fled from the man in sudden horror.

She had been ignorant, innocent as a child, yet instinct had come to her and taught her much. She realised now how she had wronged Jim and wronged herself by going with that man—she had not known then, even now she did not entirely comprehend.

But if he questioned her she would make him under-

“May I Stay?”

stand that she was still 'Nid, still the same as she had always been.

She dressed, shaking the water out of her long hair. She left it free to fall about her shoulders and dry in the sunshine as she walked back to the cottage. And at the door Jim, coming down from the Downs, met her. He looked at her with a smile of welcome.

“You’re looking lots better, you looked pretty bad last night. Had a swim?”

“Yes,” she said shyly. She lifted her hand, she wanted to touch him, she wanted him to take her hand, would have been glad and grateful if he had kissed her. But how was he to know? He was only a clumsy man. It was not likely that he could understand.

“Jim,” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, 'Nid?”

“Jim, I want to—to try and thank you——”

“There is no need,” he said. “I’m ’andy at most things, a bit of washing comes my way as easy as most other things. See that door.” He pointed with pride to the patched up door. “A rare job I ’ad with that. You wouldn’t believe ’ow rotten the wood ’ad got.”

And it was the same with the window, rotten through and through. “I’m glad I got a bit ship shape before you come. I been working in the garden, getting the weeds under a bit.” He went on talking about these matters, about the garden and the cottage, not about themselves. It was evident that he had no wish for any personal talk. It was evident too that he had no intention of questioning her, though in her heart she prayed that he might.

“And you been living here, Jim?”

“Me and Billy,” he said; “Billy Wasser, he’s a good

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boy and knows 'ow to keep 'is mouth shut. I 'ad to come somewhere, 'Nid, you see. I couldn't stand being there and people talking and——" He paused, "'Owever it don't matter, me and Billy 'as been comfortable enough 'ere."

"And now I—I've come, Jim," she said.

He nodded. "Yes, you've come and the room——"

"May—may I stay?" she whispered.

He turned to look at her in sheer surprise.

"You don't think I'd want to turn you out, 'Nid?"

"I—I didn't know," she said with a sob. "Oh, Jim, I didn't know."

"Then you know now, gel," he said gently. "I don't never want to turn you out. Some'ow when I see you last night standing there on the bank of the stream it seemed just right, just natural you should 'ave come. I don't know, but I think I 'ad an idea all the time that you might come."

He lighted the little oil stove, he filled the kettle at the stream and busied himself preparing the breakfast.

"Jim would—would you let me do that?" she asked humbly and timidly.

"You couldn't yet," he said; "you don't know where things are kep'."

"I could find out," she said; "you would tell me, I would be glad to help, Jim." There was something pitiful in her voice, in her pleading eyes.

"You can 'elp a bit," he said. "Things'll turn up for you to do, I daresay, 'Nid, only now you're tired."

"I'm not, I am well again, I'm rested and my bathe, oh, that was good, Jim, it was good of you to think of it."

"I remembered," he said, "you was always keen on bathing, 'Nid."

“May I Stay?”

Yet though she tried to make him understand, he insisted on treating her as an invalid, one in a delicate state of health. She must not lift anything, she must not wash up. She would have turned the little kitchen out and cleaned it; he would not hear of it.

“You just sit there in the sunshine and rest,” he said. He could not understand that she was eager for something to do, something to justify her presence here. Jim Bevanwood’s brain had its limitations, and it was certainly true that he could never understand ’Nid.

CHAPTER XXVI

"THE SUMMER WILL GO"

SHE followed him about as a dog might, she sat and watched him with a strange look in her great, wonderful eyes, the eyes that Geoffrey Clare had raved about—a look that was wholly eager, half hopeless, and yet sometimes in it was the dawn of hope.

But Jim Bevanwood never saw, never knew. She was here, and it seemed just natural to him that she should have come back—poor little woman. He thought, bruised and hurt, she had come to him for protection, and he had given it willingly and from his heart.

Sometimes he wondered how it might have been if Geoffrey Clare had never come into her life and his. How perhaps after years had passed 'Nid might have come to like him a little better, even to care for him—how at last they might really have become man and wife. But those dreams were ended, that future could never be. She was his wife inasmuch as she bore his name and had been through a legal ceremony of marriage with him. But there it ended, she was no more to him than she had been on that first day when he had seen her come out from the laundry with the other girls. She would never be more to him than that, now.

And yet he loved her, loved her even more dearly than in those days, but his love was different. The passion had all gone out of it. He loved her very dearly in a pitying, protecting way.

“The Summer Will Go”

And so life in the little cottage down there in the dip of the Downs went on slowly, uneventfully.

Billy Wasser came and went. He rode over to Horswood on his cycle and got what stores they needed. Billy Wasser held his tongue; no one knew that the man in the cottage was Sir James Bevanwood, no one knew that there was a woman there at all.

At first Billy had looked at 'Nid with resentful eyes. He resented her coming; he and Jim had been happy enough together alone.

“What be her doing here?” he demanded of Jim.

“She—came,” Jim said. “She knew I'd be glad, so she just came, Billy.”

“I wish her had stopped away,” Billy said. “'Tisn't like the same with a woman about the place.”

“No, it isn't like the same,” Jim said.

“When I be growed up,” Billy said, “I'll keep house with another man, I shan't never marry and be bothered with no wimmen about me, Jim.”

“Billy, if you don't ever marry,” Jim said, “you'll never know what sorrow is, my son, nor you won't never know what happiness and joy is neither. You get to learn a bit about both when you marry.”

But after a time Billy grew used to her presence. 'Nid was quiet, gentle, unlike the Lady Bevanwood he had seen ride through the village. Where was her haughtiness? It was gone. She smiled at him, she seemed to like him to come and talk to her, for she was lonely, still, very, very lonely. She knew that between Jim and herself a barrier was raised, and though she might try feebly to beat against it with her little hands, she would never be able to thrust it down.

“I've lost him. He was mine, and I didn't know how

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much he was to me," she thought. "I never knew that he was so necessary to me, I just looked on him as—as Jim, and now he's mine no longer." Alone in her room under the old thatched roof she shed many bitter tears, yet Jim never saw them. When he came she had always a smile on her face. She loved to stand beside him and watch him at his work. They might have been friends, good friends, even brother and sister together. Yet there was something—something all the time that she could never forget, even though he might.

Once in their little home it had been Jim who had been the slave, who fetched and carried. Now, insensibly, the position was reversed. It was she who waited on him and he scarcely knew it. If he wanted a thing it was she who went eagerly to get it. He had taken up his old work of carpentry; he had had wood and materials brought from Horswood. He had set himself to work practically to rebuild the cottage. He had made new doors and new windows, put in new rafters and joists and beams, new flooring where it was needed. All day long his saw and hammer could be heard, and 'Nid stood beside him, ready to bring him nails and screws, ready to put her hand on this tool or the other. When he wanted a screwdriver and she brought him a chisel, she could almost have cried at her stupidity, but Jim only laughed. He could not dream how even a foolish little mistake like that made her heart ache.

And often she asked herself, often—"How long, how long will this last? How long can it last? We cannot live here for ever, the summer will go and the winter will come and Jim—Jim must go back to his house and his people, his tenants, folk who want him, and I—I must stay here alone."

“The Summer Will Go”

One day she spoke to him about it. She asked him when he would go back.

“I’ve never thought o’ that, ’Nid,” he said. “I s’pose one day it’ll have to be.”

“And when you—you go back I shall be here alone. Billy will go back with you, he—he wouldn’t stay here with me,” she said. Her voice trembled. She had a hard fight to keep the tears back. What would he say? Her heart waited eagerly, hungrily. Would he say that where he went she must go, that his home was her home? From her soul she prayed that he might, but he did not.

“When I go back, ’Nid, as I s’pose I must one day, because there’s a deal o’ things’ll want seeing to, I’ll find some one to come here and keep you company.”

Her heart fell like lead. She understood that it was ended, that she was nothing to him now, that she could never share his home. She had forfeited the right, her place by his side out there in the world. Only here in this tiny cottage tucked away in the Downs might she and he still be together.

That night ’Nid cried herself to sleep. She woke while the night was still black, woke with a sense of yearning and longing beyond words for him. Oh! that he would come to her now, put his arms around her, hold her to his breast and kiss her as once before he had kissed her. She remembered that kiss. Then she had hated it, it had seemed to outrage her, it was like some deadly insult. Poor fool, in her ignorance she had hated the kiss that to-night she longed for, could have prayed for.

Down below she heard a step on the floor, the rattle of fireirons. Jim had not gone to bed then. She rose in her white nightdress and crept to the head of the narrow wooden stairs; there she crouched listening to him.

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And listening to those slow, clumsy, heavy movements of his, knowledge seemed suddenly to come to her, knowledge of her own heart—her love—yes, her love for him. She knew it now, she loved this quiet man, this brave, good man. He had been more father than husband and lover to her. She contrasted him with Geoffrey Clare. Often before in the old days she had contrasted them and now she seemed to realise the difference, for in the old days it was Geoffrey who had shone. The one empty, selfish, unreliable, a man who had taken her from her home, and had condemned her to shame, without a thought for her, without a care for anything in the world but for himself—and this man Jim, her husband who had been so kind, so delicate, even though he was big and rough and uncouth and uneducated. The most tender and considerate gentleman in the world, she thought, as she knelt there on the wooden floor and listened to him below.

And then the longing came to her, a longing she could not fight down, she must go and abase herself before him, kiss his hands, cry to him to pity her, to give her a little of that great wealth of love that had once been hers. She wanted it so much. Once it had meant nothing, she had not valued it, it had annoyed, even disgusted her. Now it was life itself.

Trembling, shaking, a little figure in her white nightgown, she crept bare-footed down the stairs. She peeped into the kitchen, he was sitting there beside the table, his elbows resting on it, his hand supporting his chin. He seemed to be looking straight at her, yet she knew that his eyes saw nothing. They were fixed on vacancy. And she could not move, she stood there trembling, hesitating in the darkness. She stretched out

“The Summer Will Go”

her arms to him, her heart went out to him, but her arms fell to her side. And then, presently, his head dropped, his arms folded on the table, on them he pillowed his head.

And for nearly half an hour she watched him till she knew him to be asleep, and then she crept in like a little ghost. She went to him and stood beside him, her heart beating quickly. She bent and touched his head with her lips.

“My darling, my darling!” she whispered. “Oh, how I love you—love you for all your goodness to me, your splendid charity, my—my Jim!” And then a sob broke from her breast and, afraid lest he should waken, she crept away.

And he there, immovable, heard the stairs creak under her light weight.

He had not been sleeping, he had only been thinking, thinking of the hopeless future for her and for him—for himself less than for her, for he knew what his future must be. And when she had come, he had felt her near him, he had not raised his head, he had felt her kiss on his bowed head, had heard the murmuring whisper of her voice. “My darling!” she had said. “Oh, how I love you!”

And he had longed with a great longing to rise up and take her into his arms and kiss the gladness and happiness back into her face. But he could not, he knew he could not. She was not the same, she was not his, she could never be his now, she was not the little 'Nid he had married—his pure, sweet little girl; that 'Nid could never come back to him again.

And so he stayed immovable till long, long after she had gone, and then he lifted his head slowly. His face

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was drawn and weary, haggard, and there was pain in his eyes, the look of suffering.

"Oh, how I love you!" she had said. She loved him, this woman who was his wife, and now she could be nothing to him—he nothing to her. He clenched his hands. Life was cruel, Heaven was cruel. Why could not Heaven—if there was a Heaven—have put love into her heart for him before—before she—before this other man had crossed her path? It was too late now, too late. God help them both!—too late!

He opened the door and went out into the blackness that was changing softly to grey, the grey that comes before the dawn. A chill breath seemed to be in the air and he shivered. He was in pain, his heart was bleeding. He thought of her creeping to him while she thought he slept—the kiss, the first she had ever of her own free will given to him—her murmured words of love. And he, loving her as he did, had been motionless, silent. What else could he be? He knew how great the temptation had been to take her, to hold her close to him, to kiss back the smiles and the joy, to forgive—nay, he had forgiven, always he had forgiven her. And forget — Forget the past, no, that was impossible. He would have but cheated her and himself. That past might be forgiven, but forgotten never!

He could forgive her. He knew her innocence; she had not understood what she was doing. She had sinned, yet sinned in her innocence, unknowingly. But the man, he had sinned knowingly and with deliberation, and the man should pay, must suffer—and he, too.

But, striding away over the hills, Jim knew that he had passed through a great temptation, and knew that he had done rightly. She could never be the same, never

“The Summer Will Go”

the same to him again. His 'Nid was dead and gone; this woman who loved him was not his 'Nid, the innocent, pure girl whose innocence and purity he had respected.

So he strode over the Downland, breasting the hills, climbing for the sheer joy of climbing, for the sake of the physical strength necessary to do it, and for the fatigue that he wanted to come. And presently he stood on a high hill and looked about him and saw the sun rising. Away to the east he could see the sea a faint grey streak against the horizon, to the south behind him the rolling Downs. And the flush grew in the sky and presently the sea seemed to come to life as the rays of the rising sun kissed it. A faint breeze came laden with the salt air and stirred the gorse with its yellow flowers.

He flung himself down and watched the birth of the new day, saw the larks spring up into the air, heard their shrill song from far above him. And then—he fell asleep and slept on heavily and dreamlessly, slept while the sun rose higher and yet higher.

Down in a valley blue smoke curled from the red chimneys of the little cottages. Fires were lighted, meals were being cooked, men came out of the cottage doors presently and marched away in the morning sunshine to their day's work in the fields.

Presently from the cottage doors came children on their way to the schools. The school bell was clanging, but the man lying here on the hilltop heard nothing, saw nothing.

Down in the cottage in the dell Billy Wasser stood at the door and stared far and wide. Now and again he put his hand to his mouth and shouted, “Jim, Jim!” But there was no answer.

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"Can't make out where he be gone, missus!" he said.

"He will come back," 'Nid said.

"It be gone breakfus' time," Billy said. "I'll put on the kittle, maybe he'll be back by the time it boils." But Jim did not come back, and the kettle boiled away merrily, so Billy made the tea.

And now it was 'Nid's turn to go and look with anxious eyes for some sign of the homecoming of the man she loved.

"Best have your breakfus'," Billy said.

She drank a little tea, but her heart was filled with anxiety. Again and again she rose and went to the door. And up there on the Downs the man lay sleeping in the sunlight, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion, for sleep and he had been strangers of late.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOUND

SHEILA CLARE walked through the village. The villagers bobbed and curtseyed to her; she gave them a haughty nod. The villagers never interested her; she hated common people who only wanted things all the time. Besides, she had other things to think about than villagers and little children with more or less dirty faces.

She was worried, growing anxious. James Bevanwood's disappearance was getting to be a mystery. She had made enquiries; she had been to London, she had been to the solicitors, but they had heard nothing of him. She had been to the bank; they could tell her but little, but from them she gleaned the fact that he had been changing cheques for small amounts—he had given cheques in payment for articles, that was all. She asked more questions but received no answers.

It made one thing certain, at any rate, Jim was alive and well. But where had he hidden himself? She had heard from Geoffrey. It was a violent, ill-tempered letter.

"The silly little fool took alarm and bolted, left me!" he wrote. "I kissed her and she seemed to flare up. I didn't quite understand it, as you may guess, but when I went to knock on the door of her room there was no answer, she was not there. I opened the door and found her gone. She had not even slept on the bed. I have

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no more idea where she is than the man in the moon. Let me know if she has come back."

The letter was from Paris. Sheila wired that 'Nid had not come back. So 'Nid had disappeared, too. It was strange.

Weeks had passed now since Jim Bevanwood had gone, and she had not heard one word from him. If she had been dishonestly inclined she might have enriched herself with his belongings and made off. But she was looking forward to a better harvest than that.

Of course, the man himself was objectionable in many ways, rough and uncultivated. He must be kept in the background. They would live their own lives, but she at least would be Lady Bevanwood, and she would have all the money she wanted to spend and a bit more. But to achieve that end Jim Bevanwood must be found, must be found and his mind worked upon. He must get rid of the girl, his wife, of course. The case was as clear as a pikestaff.

Geoffrey's name would have to be dragged into it, but that would not matter. Afterwards she would make amends to Geoffrey and he might stay on in Paris or go to New York. People soon forgot that sort of thing.

She had left the village and gained the Downs. She hated walking, but she could think better if she walked. What should she do? Advertise? That would be foolish. Also it might anger Bevanwood. Employ a private detective?

After all, it was a serious matter. Here was a man of name and property utterly vanished. His property needed his attention. She had not been given power of attorney—in fact, he would not have known what it

Found

meant. Things were at a standstill, more particularly, her own plans were at a standstill till she found him.

And she must find him, she must set her wits to work to discover where he had hidden himself. She must—she must find him somehow.

She stood still suddenly. She had come a long way, a good deal further than she thought, and she had found him! She was almost certain of it, the first moment her eyes lighted on the figure lying stretched out on the turf under the lee of a gorse clump.

She came nearer, walking softly on the soft turf. Yes, she had made no mistake, it was Jim Bevanwood. And he was here, here all the time, within a mile or so of his own door all these weeks. She felt a sensation of anger against him, as though he had played her a trick. She would awaken him and ask him why he had done it, what he meant. No, she would not—she was naturally cautious. He might refuse to tell her anything, might even refuse to tell her where he was living.

She would not awaken him; on the contrary, she would watch him, wait and watch, and, if possible, follow him.

There was cover in plenty—the whole place was thick with clumps of gorse, from out of which rabbits now and again scampered and then, at sight of her, shot back with a flick of their white tails.

She crouched down beside a thicket of gorse and waited. She waited an hour. The hum of the insects made her drowsy; then she heard a sound. It was Jim's awakening—a prodigious yawn. Lifting her head she could see him stretching his arms.

"I must 'a slep' hours," she heard him mutter. "What'll she think o' me being away all this time?"

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"She——" Sheila thought. "She! What she? Good heavens!" Sudden dread, sudden suspicion came to her. She clenched her hands tightly. Supposing that they were together, these two; supposing the man had been such a fool as to—— No, she would not believe it, could not believe it. It was some woman that was keeping house for him. But where was the house? She would find out, she would soon know.

He had risen and she crouched lower against the gorse. He was walking away now, down the slope of the hill, and she rose and followed him. Now and again she dropped and hid behind the gorse in case he should look round. But Jim Bevanwood, never dreaming that he was being followed, did not look round once. So he made his way back to the dip in the hill and the little cottage where 'Nid was anxiously waiting for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"THE FOOL"

'NID felt sick with fear. The long morning was passing and he had not come back. Never before had he gone without leaving word. What did it mean now? Did it mean that he repented his forgiveness of her, that he wished to see her no more, that he had gone, never to return? It was so easy to believe this; yet he had been so good to her, he had welcomed her in so kindly a fashion.

Billy Wasser, whistling merrily, had gone off on his bicycle to Horswood. Billy had no fears for the future, no ideas came into Billy's head. Jim would come back all right, of course he would. Why shouldn't he? Billy did not worry, he rode off blithely in the beautiful calm morning air, and 'Nid stood at the door of the little cottage watching and waiting with anxious eyes and a heart that felt sore and empty.

And then he came. She could scarcely believe it when she did see him. She had built up such tragedies, she had seen herself left here lonely, forsaken, she had even begun to taste of the bitterness of it. But he was here; he came with his long, swinging strides, walking beside the stream. He looked at her and smiled.

"Hello 'Nid," he said. "Why, what's the matter, little 'un?" For she had suddenly broken down, the relief of seeing him was so great. She hid her face in her

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hands and sobbed so that the sobbing shook her small, frail body.

"Why?" he said gently. "Why, little 'un, Kid, don't—don't cry. There's nothing to cry about, so fur as I know. You ain't in pain, you ain't hurt yourself, have you?" It was his first thought—tears suggested pain to him. Children cried when they were in pain.

"No, no," she said. "It's—it's not that, only I—I thought you—you had gone," she gasped.

"Gone!" He hardly seemed to understand for a moment. "'Nid, gone! You don't suppose I'd go and leave you here without a word, just go, do you?"

"I—I didn't," she sobbed. "I didn't; but, oh—oh, I am glad, so glad that you have come back." She lifted her great eyes to his, swimming now in tears, seeming the brighter and the bigger for those same tears.

"Never think I'd go without a word. When—when the time comes for me to go, 'Nid——" He paused. "When the time comes I'll tell you, mate."

"Mate." She seemed to shiver at the word; to him perhaps it had no meaning. Many a man had been mate to him, some few women perhaps; but—to her. She was his mate, his mate in life—she should have been, would have been, but for herself, her own fault.

"You—you haven't had your breakfast, Jim," she said.

"No, and I'm hungry," he said.

She hurried before him into the cottage, glad and eager to be able to do something for him. Her fears and horrors were forgotten; she was like a child pleased and proud that she had something to do.

Jim did not follow her at once, he went to the door and stood there and stared thoughtfully at the noisy little stream. Her tears, her joy at seeing him wrung his

“The Fool”

heart. It might once have meant so much, now it must mean so little. If only she had found out the truth before—before. He shivered suddenly, his face seemed to turn grey and old. It was too late now, too late. She would never belong to him.

The other woman had followed. She stood now screened by the bushes; she was leaning against a tree. She could see the little cottage; she had witnessed the meeting of the two.

“So that’s it,” Sheila Clare said to herself. She said it many times over. She had never suspected it, never dreamed that they might be together. It had come as a shock, her brain was still dulled by it. She could see him now standing by the cottage; she had seen the girl hurry in.

These two here, living together. “The fool, the fool,” she muttered. “The senseless, dishonourable fool.” She gripped her hands tightly. “She came whining back to him and he took her in. He is the sort that would. What could one expect from such a fool? James Bevanwood is not a gentleman.” She thought of the old saying anent silk purses and sows’ ears and laughed viciously to herself. But she was angry, furiously angry. She felt that in some way she had been cheated, made a fool of—these two here together, living in this place.

She did not move, yet she did not make her presence known. ‘Nid’s presence here had upset all her plans. Then she heard a voice calling:

“Jim, Jim, breakfast is ready.” It might have been some happy young wife calling to her man.

“Coming,” he answered, and went in. And Sheila Clare picked her way daintily back along the edge of the stream till she came to the high ground.

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"So she went back to him and he took her in, but he's ashamed to bring her back to his own house," she muttered. "Does the fool expect to go on living in that hole of a place all his life? Is he going to keep her shut up there? Even she won't stand that when once her remorse has worn off."

Twice she looked back at the cottage down in the dip of the hills. She could see the broken, old thatched roof, the thin curl of blue smoke coming from the wood fire; then she saw it no more. Sheila Clare walked the miles back home in a vile temper. What should she do? How act next? These two had come together again. The man was hopeless, of course, a man without any sense of honour and easily led, easily beguiled. The woman, perhaps she had some sense of shame left, she might be stung into action. Yes, it must be the woman she would deal with, Sheila Clare resolved.

But how should she deal with her? It was for her to decide, to plan and act on later. So she went away across the swelling green Downs, and down in the hollow those two never dreamed of her coming, never let a thought of her cast a shadow on them.

"Well, if you aren't getting to be quite a cook," Jim said. She flushed with pleasure, her eyes glistened. She had put all her soul into this simple, hurriedly prepared meal for him, had done it gladly, joyfully as a task of honour and great happiness.

And when it was over and he had done justice to it he sat at the door smoking his pipe and staring across at the hills with an inscrutable look in his eyes. She washed up the plates and dishes and sang over her work. He heard her voice as she sang. She had a sweet voice, untrained and uncultivated, but he knew

"The Fool"

nothing and cared nothing about that. He liked to hear her sing; a child might sing as she did from sheer gladness of heart. And then presently Billy Wasser came speeding down the chalk road on his bicycle.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello!" Jim said, and went on smoking.

"Singing, ain't she?" Billy said. He paused to listen. Jim nodded.

"Sings nice, don't she?" the boy said. He let his bicycle down softly against the wall and stood listening.

"I like 'er being 'ere, after all," he said.

"You do?" Jim said.

"Yes, don't you?"

Jim nodded. Yes, he did. He did not want to admit it to himself nor to Billy, but he did. He liked her being here, yet there was something that weighed on his heart, that prevented the happiness he might have known. If only she had been like this before, long ago. But it was too late now, wishes were idle things.

And so another day passed in the cottage down in the dell and another and yet another, and the folk in the village were growing used to seeing Sheila Clare come of a morning tramping through the village and making her way to the green Downs alone. She missed but few days and always she made to the same place, the spot where she had stood hidden by the bushes and had watched the little cottage. She came to watch it every day, waiting for the chance, but it was days before it came. She saw Jim Bevanwood most days, sometimes the girl, sometimes the village boy. But one day, crossing the Downs by herself, she saw two figures ahead of her, a man and a boy. They were coming in her direc-

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tion, and she crouched down and hid behind the gorse to let them pass. They did not see her, but went on their way. She rose and watched them till they were out of sight, or but faint specks of black in the green distance, then she hurried on. Her chance had come.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE COMING OF THE SHADOW

JIM and Billy had gone to the mill for some flour; the weight would be too much for Billy, so Jim had gone with him and 'Nid was left to herself. This expedition for flour had been talked of for some days and 'Nid had planned her own day when they should be gone.

Now she had the fire going and a great iron kettle of water on it. She had filled the big tub Jim had provided by cutting a barrel in half.

'Nid was going to have a washing-day and there was much to be washed. She had rolled her sleeves up over her fair, delicate, pretty arms, had tucked up her dress to show her slim ankles.

She was like a child playing at housekeeping. She worried no more. The day would come when she and Jim must part, he to go back to a life and a place that claimed him. But he had promised her it would not be yet. And when he went he would tell her first. She had no reason to fear now and she cheated herself into happiness, the happiness of the moment.

So she sang to herself as she poured the boiling water into the tub, as she thrust the clothes well down with the stick he had cut for her. And then a shadow fell across the open doorway and 'Nid looked up and the song on her lips was stilled and silent.

Sheila Clare walked into the room.

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"Go on," she said, "don't let me disturb you."

'Nid's lips quivered. "What do you want?" she said.

"To speak to you. What else should I want? I'm sorry for him, sorry, he was always a weak man and a fool. I didn't know how weak till now, to take you back after——" The woman paused. "There isn't a man living who would have taken you back but this one. I suppose you think you can dupe him and cheat him because he is ignorant and a fool, you——" she paused. "There isn't another man who would. I thought you had some sense of decency, but even you have failed me and failed yourself. Fancy coming back after that—whining to him for shelter and forgiveness!"

"I—I ain't ever asked him to forgive," 'Nid said. Her breast rose and fell, "No! no! I never asked him to forgive. I never thought of that, I never hoped for it, never dreamed of it. I—I just came back, that's all. I didn't even know he was here."

"A decent woman wouldn't have come," Sheila said. "You are lower than I thought you were."

"He—he doesn't mind me coming; he's even glad I am here," 'Nid said.

Sheila laughed. "Glad. He tells you so; he's such a soft fool, he doesn't want to hurt your feelings. Can't you imagine how he hates you? Your presence reminds him of—of what you are, what you have done. Yes, he must hate you even. But he doesn't tell you so, no, he's too soft-hearted for that. But don't think that he forgives; he's not the man to forgive. There isn't a man living who would forgive you and take you back, not even Jim Bevanwood."

"Why—why have you come?" 'Nid said. She pressed her hands against her breast.

The Coming of the Shadow

"To tell you I'm sorry for you. I pity you and him, too," Sheila said. "To tell you that if you have any sense of fitness you will go. Can't you understand that your presence here, the sight of you every day of his life, must be torture to him, to this man? You were his wife; you are face to face with him every day now. You were false to him, you brought shame on his name and a good name, it was till you blackened it."

"But—but I didn't know, I didn't know! Oh, I didn't understand properly," 'Nid cried. "Don't you understand, I didn't understand till——" She paused.

Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "You take me for a fool. Where did I first see you? In a dirty little London laundry—a fine place for perfect innocence to flourish, eh?" she sneered. "Of course I believe you. You were so unworldly, you—— Do you think he believes you? Do you think he doesn't hate the memory that every sight of you must bring into his mind?"

"You—you don't think I ought to have come back?"

"Think you ought to have come back? I don't think any woman in her sense would have come back. She must be dead to self-respect and pride to come back, to lick the hand of the man she has wronged as you wronged him. What's the end of it going to be? Answer me. What is the end of it going to be? Do you think he'll take you back to your—to his house and acknowledge you again before the world as his wife?"

"No," 'Nid said quietly, "I don't hope for that, miss."

"Then what do you hope for?"

"I—I haven't thought. I don't suppose there is much hope for me. I've just tried to be content and happy in the present. I haven't dared to think about the future. He'll go back one day—he'll have to, very likely, when

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the summer ends, he'll have to go back, and then——”

“And then?” Sheila asked

“I don't know. Maybe I shall be able to live on here by myself. I haven't thought, I don't want to think.”

“So you are living in a fool's paradise and doing this man a wrong by cheating yourself and him.”

“I have not cheated him.”

“Has he asked you nothing? Have you told him nothing?”

“No,” 'Nid said simply. “I just came back and he held out his hand to me and took me in, that's all.”

“And there was nothing said, nothing of the past, nothing of what you did, nothing of—of that other man, my brother?”

“No,” 'Nid said. “We've never spoken about anything.”

Sheila stared across the little room. How could she hope to understand such people as these? Her voice was harsh with impatience.

“Can't you realise that you are doing this man a great wrong, that you are taking advantage of his weakness of character, his stupid good nature, his dislike to cause pain? Can't you realise that he must hate to see you, you who were once his wife, and who brought shame and dishonour to him? Can't you see it, or are you blind?”

“I didn't think of it,” 'Nid said. “I tried not to.” She twisted her hands together nervously.

“What ought I to do?” she said.

“You ought never to have come here to him. You ought to have avoided him, never seen him again or let him see you.”

“You think I ought to go?” 'Nid said.

“Can there be two thoughts on the subject?” Sheila

The Coming of the Shadow

said, shrugging her shoulders. "But for you he would probably have returned to his home long ago. As it is, I suppose he is too weak-willed to do so, too good-natured to want to cause you pain. But sooner or later he must come back. What's the use of your living on like this, knowing that the end must soon be in sight, that he must leave you? Tell me, you do not think—don't cheat yourself for one moment into thinking—that he will forgive you and take you back, let you again fill your place as mistress of his home, as his wife, you who have dragged his good name in the mire, you who have done the things for which no woman is ever forgiven? He's a fool, yet not so great a fool as that."

"No," 'Nid said. "No, I—I don't hope for—for anything. I've simply tried to believe that there isn't no future at all. I've just lived in each day; to-day is enough. I haven't thought of to-morrow—I didn't dare."

"But to-morrow comes," Sheila said "I am sorry for you," she said, "sorry. I don't think it was all your fault; I blame my brother most. He knew the world, you were ignorant, though I will never believe innocent! Still, I am sorry for you; I blame Geoffrey. But whoever is to blame, the fact remains. And I find you here——"

"I ought to go?"

"You ought to go. You ought never to be here at all; it is a sin against that man who is too weak and good-natured to resent it. But do you think he doesn't resent it in his heart?"

"I—I s'pose he does," 'Nid said miserably. "I s'pose he must, only I never thought of it till you told me. If I had better go, then—then I will go!"

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"Of course!" Sheila said. "Of course, and soon. You should not delay—the sooner the better; but, as I said, I am sorry for you, I'd like to help you. My brother was the cause; I feel myself involved in this, in some way responsible. You will need money; I have brought some. You had better take it. Go away, find some place and write to me. Let me know where you are and I will see what can be done for you." She put the money on the table. "At least be decent enough to go at once!" she said.

She glanced at 'Nid, she saw the white, tragic little face and she knew she had won.

"You're going; it will be the greatest benefit, the greatest blessing you can bestow on James Bevanwood. It is what he in his heart must wish, but does not like to put into words!" And then she went. She went by the way she had come—she walked along the stream and through the little coppice and came out at the base of the slope; and as she went she did not see Billy Wasser who was speeding back.

But he saw her and knew her at once. What was she here for? It was Miss Clare, he knew her—who in the village did not? He stood watching her, round-eyed. Billy went on slowly to the house. He had come back for a sack—the miller had explained his inability to supply sacks, so Jim was waiting at the mill and he, Billy, had come back for the necessary sack. He found one in the kitchen; he was surprised to see a large tub full of steaming water. He looked into the tub and saw clothes lying in the bottom of it, but of 'Nid there was no sign. He called out and she answered him from above.

"I come back for a sack!" he shouted. "Now I be

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going again!" He paused. Should he mention that he had seen Sheila Clare? No, it was difficult to carry on conversation at the top of his voice; he would leave it till he came back. So he took the sack and trudged off up the hillside and to the distant mill, and then he forgot Sheila Clare.

The sack was filled and it was heavy, and it was a long way to carry it back. Jim slung it across his broad shoulders, but even he, strong as he was, felt in need of rest and an occasional stop, so they progressed but slowly. Presently they sat down under the scanty shade of a furze bush and made their meal off bread and cheese. Billy stretched himself out on the turf. He had forgotten all about Sheila Clare—his memory was never of the best, and there were so many other things to distract it now.

They had reckoned that getting the flour would be the better part of an all-day job; the delay occasioned by the sack had lengthened the task considerably, so that it was near the end of the afternoon when they came back in sight of the cottage.

"I shan't be sorry to get it down, Billy," Jim said.

"Let's take a turn!" Billy said.

"You!" Jim laughed. "No, we'll soon be there, old man."

He looked eagerly. He hoped, almost expected to see her standing there by the stream watching for them, but he saw nothing. He became conscious, too, that there was no thin coil of smoke ascending from the chimney. He wondered. 'Nid would be expecting them, surely, and knowing that they had gone short of food would have prepared a meal for them. He wondered most of all at the absence of the smoke.

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Billy put his two hands to his mouth and shouted.

"She'll 'ear!" he said, and he smiled in anticipation.

But she did not hear; there was no sign of the little figure.

"Funny!" Billy said. "She always 'eard me shout before." He tried again, but there was no answer.

So they went down to the valley and gained the stream and came to the cottage and the door was closed.

"'Nid, 'Nid!" Billy shouted. "'Ere we be! Open the door, 'tis me and Jim!" But the door remained fast.

It was Billy who opened it. He looked in and turned to stare in wonder at Jim. The little kitchen was neat and tidy, the things that she had washed were hanging out on a line outside the cottage, the fire in the hearth was all laid ready for lighting, the table was laid for a meal, but of 'Nid no sign.

"'Nid!" Jim shouted. "'Nid, 'Nid, girl, 'Nid!" But his voice was unanswered save by the echoes.

"Funny 'er going out!" Billy said. "Maybe she came to meet we." He paused. "Hello!" he said. He took up a folded paper from the table and looked at it. On it was written the one word—"Jim."

"For you," he said.

Jim's hand shook a little as he stretched out to take the paper; he fumbled with it awkwardly as he opened it.

"I know now I did not ought ever to have come, it was wrong. But I was so tired and so lonely, and I hadn't anywhere else to go to, but I know it was wrong. I ought to have turned back when I see you at the door, but I couldn't. I'm going now, I never asked you to forgive me nothing, Jim, I never hoped for that! I didn't really know how wicked I was, I never under-

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stood! I shan't come back no more, it's good-bye this time, Jim, and thank you for being good to me, 'Ned."

He read it through and looked at Billy Wasser.

"She's—she's gone!" he said. "She's gone, Billy, and—and she ain't coming back!"

CHAPTER XXX

GONE

BILLY stared at Jim round-eyed.

"She'll come back," he said. "Why should she 'ave gone, Jim? Jim, why should she 'ave gone like this? We was all so 'appy together, Jim!"

"'Appy!" Jim said, "yes, 'appy. 'Thank you for being good to me.'" He read her last words again. "Being good to her——" How could he ever be anything but good to her? Now she had gone. Why—why? Why, he questioned himself suddenly, why should she have gone like this? Yesterday morning there had been no signs to suggest that she should creep away like this. What had happened?

"I s'pect it's 'er coming," Billy said, answering Jim's unspoken question.

"'Er—'er coming! What do you mean?" Jim said.

"'Er—Miss, what's-'er-name, 'er up at your 'ouse; she's been 'ere to-day; I seen 'er when I come back for the sack."

"What?" Jim thundered.

Billy gave a jump.

"It's right, Jim," he said. "Don't 'oller at me like that. I seen 'er, I did; she was sneaking off. She'd been 'ere. I don't know 'ow I come to forget it. I seen 'er, Miss Clare."

"Sheila Clare here?" How did she find out? How

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did she come to know and, knowing, what right had she to come here? A sudden mad fury came to Jim. He laid hold of Billy by the shoulder with a grip that made Billy wince.

"Billy, you are sure of this, you are sure you see 'er 'ere?"

"I did," Billy said. "I did, Jim, straight, and I fergot to tell you. It was when I come back for the sack; I seen her down by the stream, Jim. She was going away. I watched her up the Downs, then when I come here there was a tub full of clothes in the middle of the room, but 'Nid wasn't 'ere. She was upstairs—getting ready to go, maybe, but she must have stayed to tidy up. Very like she see me coming, Jim, and hid so's I shouldn't see 'er. Maybe something Miss Clare said to 'er made 'Nid make up her mind to go."

"Yes," Jim said. "Yes, that's it, that's it."

"Only I be going to find her," Billy said. "She won't 'ave gone a wonderful long way. She 'ad to stay a bit to clear up and lay the fire and the tea and all that—she carn't 'ave gone fur, Jim. Then she 'ad to write that there letter to you. Writing a letter takes a long time. I'll find 'er," he added, and his voice was filled with resolution. "Betcher I find 'er, Jim."

"Find her, old man, and bring her back," Jim said. "Find her, yes, Billy, lad, we'll find her if we hunt the world for her, but——" And his face darkened suddenly and his eyes grew hard and fierce. "I'll see her, that woman, first—I'm going now, Billy, going to see Sheila Clare. Maybe she knows where 'Nid has gone."

"You make 'er tell you, Jim," Billy said. "Make 'er—and me, I'll go and 'unt for 'er now and I'll find 'er, I will."

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He forgot that he was tired, that he was hungry, he forgot everything save the pain and the mad, passionate fury against Sheila Clare. How had she dared to come here? By what means had she found out their hiding-place? What had she said to 'Nid? Jim was off. He breasted the hill; he strode away across the Downs. Exercise, instead of soothing him, seemed only to inflame his anger against the woman. He reached the village in the dusk.

The villagers stared at him, at his unfamiliar figure; they greeted him with smiles and bobs, and wondered that he never even gave them a glance. He strode among them and on to his own home. His clothes had suffered since he had last left it; he was powdered with the flour from the mill where he had been all day. His boots were ragged and worn, his face burned brown by the sun. He wore no collar or tie and he looked as little like Sir James Curtis Bevanwood, master of this fine house, as a man might look. The manservant who opened the door to him stared at him, taking him for a moment for some audacious tramp who dared to present himself at the hall door, but the next moment he knew him.

"Where is Miss Clare?" Jim demanded.

"Miss—Miss Clare, sir?"

"You heard me, didn't you?" Jim thundered.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir, yes, sir! I heard, Sir James. Miss Clare is in—in the drawing-room, I think, and——"

Jim passed him by, then stopped.

"Miss Clare was out this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Walking?"

"I—I believe so, sir."

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"She went far, eh? Out some time? Answer me, you fool, don't stand gaping at me. I say Miss Clare was out walking this morning and she was a long time gone?"

"Yes, sir," the man said. "Miss Clare has been walking a lot lately, taking long walks most mornings now. She was out about three hours, Sir James."

Jim nodded. The black fury that filled him was at fever-point now. He flung open the door and strode into the drawing-room. As usual when he entered that room of precious nicknacks, he blundered into something. It was a little table overcrowded with china; it fell with a crash and he trampled on the valuable fragments.

"Good—good gracious!" Sheila Clare started up. "Who—oh, Jim, you—you! How nice! What a surprise! Where have you been, you bad——"

"Silence," he said. "It's not for you to ask me no questions, but for me to ask you. Where 'ave you been and what 'ave you been doing? Answer that."

"Really, Jim," she said. "Don't shout at me like that, you quite forget——"

"Answer me," he said. "You 'ear what I say? What 'ave you been up to and where was you this morning?"

"My poor nerves," she said. "You burst into the room like a bull in a china shop and then start shouting at me. Jim, really, where are your manners, my dear man?"

"Understand!" he said. "Don't play the fool! Answer me, or by 'eaven——" He made one stride to her and gripped her shoulder; in his passion he forgot his strength. She winced and whined.

"Don't—don't, you hurt! Oh, you—you cruel man!"

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Your hard fingers hurt me, James Bevanwood. Are you mad?"

"Pretty near," he said firmly. "And it's you as drove me mad. 'Ang you and curse your interfering. What did you want to come and upset 'Nid and drive 'er off for?"

"Really I don't understand you," she said.

"Liar!" he said. "You do."

"Sir James Bevanwood, as you insult——"

"I'm calling you by your name," he said. "I say liar, and liar you are. You went to the cottage this morning, you saw 'Nid. What lies did you tell 'er to drive 'er to go away? Answer me. By 'eaven, you shall if—if I choke the truth out of you."

She saw his fury and she was frightened. This man she had mocked at, jeered at, laughed at, this puppet ready to dance when she pulled the string—he was a man after all and a big man, fierce, strong and powerful.

"You—you hurt me," she whimpered.

"You've 'urt me badly—badly," he said. "Why did you go there?"

"I haven't been out of the house to-day."

"Liar!" he said. He strode to the door. "Burton, you, Burton, come here." The man had been lurking about the hall filled with curiosity concerning Sir James' unexpected return.

"Oh, really, you needn't bring the servants into this."

Burton stood at the door.

"This woman was out this morning?" Jim said. He pointed at Sheila Clare.

"Miss—Miss Clare——"

"Answer me. I put a question. I say this woman was out walking for some hours this morning?"

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"Yes, yes, sir."

"That'll do; you go—go, you 'ear, go."

Burton went—he was glad to go. He hurried down to the kitchens.

"Like a madman he is, shouting and raving and calling Miss Clare 'this woman' and—I don't know what—what's happened, I don't, only I think he's gone off his head."

"So you come here, you shout at me, bully me, ill-treat me, and—and insult me before the servants," she said, with a last attempt at bluster.

"Why didn't you leave me and 'Nid alone? What on this earth 'as she and me to do with you?" he cried. "What did you go and tell 'er your infernal lies and drive 'er away for? Answer, will you?"

"I refuse to answer any one who shouts at—at me and uses such language. If you were a gentleman——"

"I'm not; I'm just a man who's goaded to see red by a lying, interfering, mischief-making woman, and that woman's you. I'm 'ere for the truth, and, by 'eaven, I'm going to get it. You needn't try lying with me. Maybe among your gentleman friends——" He paused with a short laugh, "You ain't seen a man in a mad rage like you see me, eh? You don't get no soft speeches from me. You'll get somethink as'll choke the truth out of you. The truth, you 'ear, the truth. And if you fool with me, by 'eaven, look out for yourself."

She looked at him. His eyes were red with fury, he looked like a man beside himself, a dangerous man, a man as dangerous as an infuriated tiger. She felt fear for herself, bodily fear. She was shut up with a madman who would use his strength if she dared him.

"It—it was for your sake. She—she had no right to

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—to go back to you. You were a fool to take her back after—after what has happened. She is shamed and disgraced. She can never take her place beside you as your wife. You were weak to take her back, I—I told her that; I had the right to tell her, I was your friend.”

“My friend,” he said. “You?” He paused. “Listen to me,” he said quietly, so quietly that she was startled by the change in him.

“’Nid was a child, as innocent as a baby. Your brother lied to her, tricked ’er, deceived ’er. Then ’e—’e cast her off; such men do, I believe—I ’ave ’eard of it before. She was broken-’earted, lonely and ’ungry; ’er little shoes was wore off ’er little feet, and then she come to me—not to me, she didn’t know as I was there at the cottage. She crep’ there to die, that’s why she come. And I was there and I took ’er by the ’and and led ’er in. You say I didn’t ought to take ’er back; I didn’t. She’s not my wife now. She just come to me ’omeless and friendless, broken in ’eart and spirit and—and I took ’er in like I might ’ave took in a ’ungry child. That’s all. You—you don’t understand, your sort wouldn’t. S’posing it ’ad been one of your friends, one of these gentlemen you’re telling me about, what would ’e ’ave done?”

“He would have done what any man who values his honour would have done—he would have freed himself from a woman unworthy to be his wife, he would have regained his freedom.”

“And got money—damages out of the man, eh?” Jim said quietly. “That’s what a gentleman would ’ave done, isn’t it? I am going to tell you what a plain man like me is going to do. ’E’s going to stand by ’er and ’elp ’er. She was a little innocent child and that man,

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your brother, led 'er away. She didn't know of wrong till 'e showed 'er what it was. Then, frightened and broken-'earted, she crep' away from 'im—'e was tired of 'er, I suppose. So she come back to me and I—I took 'er in. It ain't with 'er, but it's with the man I've got to settle, and I'm going to settle one day in full." His quietude was ominous after the flaring passion of just now. In his eyes were little points of fire, his face seemed to have grown older, graver, more determined.

"I'm going to wait," he said; "wait. One day me and that man'll meet—it's bound to be, it's going to 'appen, I know it—and then——"

"Yes?" she whispered, then?"

"Then I shall take 'is throat between my two 'ands and I shall crush the life out of 'im. I shall kill 'im," he said, "that's all. It's low and brutal and 'orrid, ain't it? I see you shiver at it—it ain't what a gentleman would do, is it? But it's what—what a plain man like me is going to do."

"You—you can't!" she cried. "He——" She paused. "'Nid is—oh—I tell you——"

"I shall do it. Now, answer me, where is she?"

"I do not know."

"You drove 'er away—where to?"

"I tell you I do not know, I don't know, I don't know!"

"You're telling me the truth?" he asked.

"I swear I am, I swear it is true. I saw her; I told her she was not acting fairly to you to go back to you. I told her you were too kind, too foolish, too warm-hearted. I told her that it was impossible that you could forgive, that she could be anything to you again. I told

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her that it was unfair of her to take advantage of your weakness."

"Yes," he said, "go on."

"That is all; I left her."

"And she went, too, soon after you went," he said. "She left a letter for me, thanking me for being good to 'er. Being good to—to 'er." He laughed shakily. "All right, I'll find 'er," he said quietly; "and now I'm going to settle with you."

"Settle, I don't understand——"

"What money 'ave you got, all you got in the world, I mean?"

"Very, very little."

"Answer me, what money 'ave you got?"

"Only a hundred and fifty a year; it is all I have."

He nodded. "You'll 'ave twice as much; I'll add another 'undred and fifty a year to it. To-morrow I'd like you to pack your things and get out of this."

"You—you mean I am to go?"

"I said it. You're 'is sister. I don't want you to be 'ere when 'e comes and 'e's bound to come. You'd best go. To-morrow I want you gone. I don't want you nor none of the breed of you in this 'ouse to-morrow. Go! I'll write to the lawyers about the money."

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim, I have been your friend—all I did was for your sake. I wanted——"

"You'll go to-morrow," he said quietly, "them's my orders. I don't want you 'ere for many reasons. I want you and all belonging to you out o' this! You'll meet 'im, likely as not; you can tell 'im what I 'ave just said, it won't make no difference. We'll meet, 'im and me, just the same—bound to. It may be 'ere on the Downs, it may be in the streets of London, I don't know,

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but we'll meet; and when we meet I'll kill 'im! Tell 'im that if you like!" He turned away.

"Jim!" she cried, "this is—is horrible. You—you can't think—think of the penalty! They will——"

"'Ang me!" he said. "I know, I've reckoned all that up. I'm willing to pay, and I'll pay all right!"

"Jim!" she cried. "Jim, come—come back; you must, you shall! I wish to speak to you! Listen!"

But he did not stay, he strode to the door.

"You'll go to-morrow," he said. "That's all! I don't want to 'ear nothing more from you. We shan't meet again, I s'pose—I 'ope not. You'll get the money—it'll keep you from starving, any'ow."

"Listen!" She paused. "You—you shall! Listen, I——"

But he was gone. She ran to the door and caught at the handle, then stood still. She wanted to tell him the truth, to tell him that 'Nid was—— But why should she? A great, furious, sullen hatred of 'Nid and himself rose in her breast. Why should she bring happiness to these two? No, she would tell him nothing—nothing! He would not carry out his threat, he would not dare; he would be afraid of the penalty. Men did not take life lightly, they had their own necks to think of. He was boasting, bragging—he would not do it. But she did not know the man, or perhaps she did and was trying to stifle her knowledge of him. But he was gone now; it was too late!

CHAPTER XXXI

HOW BILLY FOUND HER

JIM was out on the Downs, striding through the starlight, his face turned towards the little cottage far away down the valley. But his thoughts were with her. He was recalling that night when she had thought him sleeping, when she had crept to his side and kissed his bowed head. His heart ached with love for her, need and longing. Only he knew of the fight that he had put up that night, the fight against himself, the longing to take her into his arms, to kiss her hair, her eyes, her lips, to tell her that the past was past, dead—that it should never, never rise between them again.

But he had not, and now in his heart he knew that he was glad he had not. She was not his, had never been his, would never be now. Love her he might, protect her, cherish her, but she could never be to him what once he had hoped and prayed she would be—his other self, part of his life, his wife, companion, friend, everything! That was impossible now; besides, it would not be for long, it could not, for he would have his work to do when the time came. It was not revenge—he sought no revenge—it was simple justice. He could take this man to the courts, he could blacken 'Nid's name for ever, he could obtain damages represented by pounds, shillings and pence; a gentleman might, but he was primitive man, a barbarian. A man had wronged him, more,

How Billy Found Her

had wronged 'Nid, and that man must pay with his life. He had settled it, had calmly and coolly reasoned it all out with himself. There was no passion behind it, only quiet determination. When the moment came he would not shrink; he would do it just as he had said he would do it.

So in the dim solitude of the night he came to the dip in the hills and found himself down beside the stream, and presently he came to the cottage, the door of which stood wide. There was no light within, no sign of human habitation. The dark cheerlessness of the place struck him; he called for Billy, called the name again and again and there was no answer. He went upstairs—the two little rooms were empty.

Then he came back to the little kitchen and sat down in the darkness and stretched his arms out on the table before him and laid his head on them, just as that night when she had come. Hours ago he had been tired and hungry with all a healthy man's honest hunger, now he was neither. He had forgotten hunger, forgotten his weariness; he only thought of her, wondered where she was. He pictured Billy hunting for her, brave little heart that the boy was!

"God bless him!" Jim muttered. "I mustn't forget Billy before I—before I get finished with it all. I've got to remember the boy. I never 'ad a better friend than Billy!"

He rose presently and went to the door. The long night was slowly passing; he could see a pale grey light growing in the sky, a wind came rustling among the trees, it rippled the surface of the stream that sang at his feet. It brought a sense of chill with it; he shuddered, and then the breeze was gone and the calm fell

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again. And so the morning broke, the grey grew lighter. He saw the trees beside the stream rising out of a bath of mist; gradually the mist drifted away, a pale yellow streak of light shot across the sky, and then the birds, the thrushes, the starlings in the trees, wakened with the new day. The rooks left their high homes and went wheeling overhead against the pink and the primrose of the sky. The sun had come back to the earth, bringing life and light, but there was no light in his heart! He looked with sombre eyes to the inevitable end, that meeting that he knew with fatalistic certainty would one day surely come.

And down the hill came a little black figure, a figure that stood still for a moment, that put its hands to its mouth and shouted.

Faintly Jim Bevanwood heard the shout above the tinkling of the stream; he turned slowly and saw the black speck on the green hillside. It was Billy coming back. He watched the boy as he sped nearer and nearer; now and again Billy waved his arms, yet Jim did not know, could not guess why. And presently Billy, breathless and reeling a little with fatigue, came.

"Jim," he said hoarsely, "Jim, I—I found 'er. I said I would, mate—I found 'er, Jim!"

"Found 'er?" Jim said quietly, so quietly that he wondered at himself.

Billy nodded, he was spent and gasping for breath. He lifted a ragged arm and pointed towards the rising sun. "Out there, I don't know 'ow, but I just found 'er, just as it was getting light. Jim, I'd 'unted all night, I—I didn't mean coming back; she's there, down by the chalk pit, there where the old kiln used to be. She's lying there!"

How Billy Found Her

“’Urt?” Jim whispered.

Billy shook his head. “No, Jim, only asleep, and—and I didn’t waken her; I just left ’er lying there and come back to tell you.”

Jim put his arm around the boy’s shoulder; he drew him to him and held him tightly for a moment.

“All right, Billy,” he said quietly. “All right, boy, I’ll go—go and bring ’er ’ome.”

CHAPTER XXXII

"I DIDN'T KNOW"

HE found her just where Billy had told him he would. She was lying on her side, her right arm thrust out, her head against her shoulder. She was sleeping sweetly and calmly as a child, and as a child she looked, so small, so fragile, such a "kid," he thought, as he stood looking down at her; there was a burning in his eyes, a throb at his heart. It seemed to him that it would be so easy to stoop, to pick her up and take her into his arms and then—then to carry her away to the far ends of the earth. It did not matter where so long as she was with him.

He was tempted, greatly tempted as he stood there looking down at her, tempted to forgo everything, to make life afresh, anew for her and for himself, to wipe out the past, to forgive. He had long ago forgiven her. It was the other he could not forgive. She had been only an innocent child, unconscious of evil, a little wayward, a little self-willed, yet meaning no wrong.

Standing there watching her as she lay sleeping at his feet, he remembered how he had first seen her, in that grimy London street, the square, squat, ugly yellow brick background of the laundry, the swarm of women and girls, tired after the toil of the day, yet noisy, talking and laughing stridently. And then she had come among them like a flower in the wilderness. So he had seen her that

“I Didn’t Know”

first time, and that day she had walked straight into his heart; from that moment he loved her and needed her, yet never as he loved her and needed her now.

His lips trembled, there was a burning in his eyes; he stretched out his hand as to touch her, and his arm fell heavily to his side. And then he fell on to his knees beside her and bent over her and watched her as she slept. The light breeze lifted her hair and drew it across his face—there was the scent of the sea that she loved in her hair. A great red brown curl fell against her white neck. Fearfully he stretched out his hand, he touched it, lifted it and put his lips to it.

She moved slightly, moaned a little in her sleep, and then turned. She opened her eyes and stared at him.

“I—I didn’t know,” she said. Perhaps she did not know what she was saying. Her eyes were filled with wonder; they took in the blue sky with its fleecy clouds, the green turf, the swell of the downland, the clumps of furze yellow with flower. And then they wandered back to him.

“I—I didn’t know,” she said again.

“I know you didn’t,” he said gently. “Of course you didn’t know, ’Nid—’Nid, you didn’t ought——” He paused. “You didn’t ought to come out here and go to sleep, you might catch cold or something.”

He had command of himself again. He was talking to her, reproving her as a father might reprove a child.

“Why—why did I come here?” she said. “I don’t remember. Oh!” She drew a long breath, a fluttering sigh.

“You didn’t ought to have gone like that, ’Nid; it wasn’t fair,” he said.

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"Yes, it was fair and right; it was me coming back that was wrong."

"She told you that?"

Her truthful eyes met his. "Yes," she said.

"She lied," Jim said fiercely. "That woman is a liar. Anyway, she was wrong. 'Nid, you got to come back. Billy's waiting for you. Billy's been 'unting all night long for you, and—and breakfast'll be ready by now. Let me 'elp you." He held out his hand to her; for a moment it seemed that she would take it, then she drew away and rose unaided.

"I—I didn't ought to come back, Jim," she said. "It 'ud be best for me to go."

"You got to come back," he said, "'ome."

"Home!" She laughed a little tremulously, uncertainly, and her eyes filled with tears. He dared not look at her, he knew that his resolutions would waver; he wanted to hold out his arms to her, to take her back not only to his home, but into his heart. No, she was there already, had always been.

"Come," he said; his voice was rough and a little hard; it had to be or he would have betrayed himself.

And so they went back together through the sunlight, over the Downs, and far away in the haze lay the sea.

"Jim," she said timidly, "Jim."

"Yes, kid?"

"Jim, I—I didn't ought to have come back. She was right, she wasn't lying. You—you can't take me back again now, Jim."

He did not answer; he strode on so that she had almost to run beside him.

"I didn't ought to have come back again," she said.

"I Didn't Know"

"I've been wicked to you, Jim." Her voice trembled, there were tears in it.

"I—I know," he said. "I know, don't—don't talk about it. Not now, one day, you—you, 'Nid—you've never got to—to play this trick on me again. You hear me?" he added sharply. "Never again, never go off like that no more. Where was you thinking of getting to, 'Nid?"

"I—I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

"What was you after, then? Where was you going?"

She shook her head; her hair, all unbound, fell about her shoulders; her face looked very small, pale and oval; she held her hands together over her breast.

"I—I wanted to die, Jim," she said quietly.

He started and looked at her. "Why?" he said sharply.

She shook her head. "I—I just wanted to die, that's all. I didn't want to go on living, and—and I don't know, Jim—but it isn't easy to die because one just wants it. I thought that that day I came back. I didn't think you'd been there, you and Billy; I thought it would all be empty and lonely. I meant to creep in there and—and wait, just wait, Jim. And then I saw you standing there, and you—you smiled at me, like as if I'd never done wrong and wicked things, and you took me in, Jim, and then I wanted to go on living."

"Yes," he said huskily. "I know, I've been the same. Now I know I've got to go on living for a bit," he added slowly.

"Jim, do you remember that time when I told you I didn't never want to see you again because you had been fighting and—and your face was all——"

"I remember," he said; "don't talk about that, 'Nid."

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"I didn't know then you'd been fighting for me, Jim," she said.

"No, you didn't know," he said. "Look, there's the smoke coming from the chimbley. Billy'll be getting the breakfast; he's a good lad, Billy. When I—I'm——" He paused. "One day I'd like Billy to get his chance in life. I'd like 'im to 'ave the money to get learning and a start. There's a good man in Billy."

"Yes," she said.

"You won't forget that, 'Nid, will you?" he said earnestly. "There isn't much I'm bothering about, but I been thinking of Billy. I want him to have a chance in life; I reckon Billy'll make good. You'll remember that, 'Nid?"

"Why do you ask me to remember that?"

"Because I want it done," he said.

"When—when?" she cried, and there was sudden terror in her voice. "Jim, why do you speak like that, telling me what you want done when—when you could do it yourself, Jim? You don't mean——?" She stretched out her hand and caught his arm. He wondered at the strength of the grip of her little hand and looked down into the wide, staring eyes.

"Jim, you—you don't mean you're going to—to die?" she said.

"Me?" he said. "Me die?" He laughed. "No, I reckon I'll live just about as long as I want to, only—only I'd like you to know what I think about Billy. See, there he is, waving to us. Come, 'Nid, our breakfast'll be getting cold."

But she stood still suddenly.

"Jim, I—I didn't ought to go back."

"You've got to," he said roughly. "You've got to."

"I Didn't Know"

"Jim, do—do you want me back?"

Want her back, want her—— "'Nid, you—you're talking foolish, you've got to come back and stay and never go wandering off again."

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes, I'll come back."

Twice on the steep hillside she stumbled a little, and he threw out his hand to help her, but she drew back. It seemed that she could not bear him to touch her, and Jim saw it and wondered, wondered why, for he did not forget that night when she had stolen down the narrow stairs to him and had bent over him and kissed him, thinking him asleep, and had whispered of her love for him, the love he had craved for, hungered for once and that had now come too late.

"I s'pose I'll never understand 'er quite," he thought.

Billy to his other good qualities added that of tact.

"Come on, you two," he said. "Breakfast is getting cold; been blackberrying or somethink?"

He looked at them with his bright eyes, smiled, and vanished into the cottage.

"I 'ated 'er coming," he said to himself. "I was against 'er, I thought she didn't want me. Now I'd 'ate 'er going." She came in first and he turned.

"Billy," she said. The boy hesitated for a moment; he was a boy with all a natural boyish hatred of sentiment and emotion, but somehow she looked so small and weak, she looked sad.

"'Nid," he said quietly, "don't you never go and do that again; you wouldn't if—if you seen 'im like I did when he read that letter you writ. 'Billy, she's gone,' he said. 'Gone for good, Billy.' I shan't never forget 'earing 'im say that, 'Nid."

"Billy, di—did he care?" she whispered.

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"It broke 'im all up," Billy said; he went to her. "'Nid, 'Nid, don't never play with 'im again, he's too good a sort." He held up his face to her, the fresh, innocent face of boyhood, and she put her arms around his neck and bent her head till it touched his shoulder.

"Oh, Billy, Billy!" she said. "I didn't ought to—to have come, but—oh! I'm glad to be back, glad to be back, Billy."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"I TOLD HIM NOTHING"

IT seems," Sheila Clare said, "that you have made a hopeless tangle of everything. You let her escape you, she is back with him; he came to me raving and bullying, he drove me out of the house. He makes me a handsome allowance." She laughed derisively, bitterly. "A hundred and fifty a year to keep me from starving, that's what I get, and you—you get nothing, you fool."

Her brother stood staring at her, his face was gloomy.

"How should I know that she would slip away from me like that?" he said.

"You were a fool to trust her. You frightened her, I suppose."

"I—I kissed her," he said, "I kissed her and then—then I never saw her again."

Sheila Clare laughed. "And never will," she said; "she has gone back to him, to Bevanwood. They are living in some hole of a half-ruined cottage in a dip of the Downs, quite Arcadian."

"And he knows that she—that I——" Geoffrey Clare paused. "He must know or he wouldn't take her back."

"He knows nothing. She came back days after. How was he to know? I suppose he didn't question her, she offered no information. He spoke of you."

"Yes?" the other said eagerly.

"He is waiting for you; he says that one day he will

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kill you." Her voice shook with sudden fear. "And he will meet you one day; when that day comes he means to kill you, and he will do it. I know that man, I say he will do it. If you had heard him as I did you would understand. He said it coldly, dispassionately; it was no boast, no wild threat, it was just a quiet promise that he had made to himself. 'I shall meet him one day, and then I shall kill him.' He said it like that and he meant it."

"But you——" the man cried, "you—you told him that she was as pure and innocent as when——"

"I told him nothing, I hated him too much. I didn't want to give him tidings of comfort and joy."

"You were willing to sacrifice me, then?" he said.

"Afterwards I was sorry, I meant to call him back. I did call, but it was too late, he had gone."

"And you mean to say that he believes—and—and is waiting for me to revenge himself for a wrong that never was——"

"Yes, I've told you, I've warned you; you'll do better to leave the country. I tell you the man is dangerous, that sort of man is. He has promised himself a certain thing, and he will keep that promise. He won't count the penalty, he will just do it, so—so you must go!"

"I'm not quite a coward," Geoffrey Clare said. "I'm pretty low in some things." He paused. "But I'm still a bit of a man," he laughed. "So he is going to kill me for a fancied wrong, and you might have set everything right and shielded me from danger and did not. I am grateful to you; you played a sisterly, a womanly part!" He laughed sharply. "Since you did not tell him the truth, I shall!"

“I Told Him Nothing”

“You—you will not go!” she cried. “You must not, you don’t understand!”

“I shall go and tell him; after that——” He shrugged his shoulders. “I am a man, I can take care of myself; a man who doesn’t arm himself before he steps into the lion’s den is a fool!”

“What are you going to do?” she cried.

“It does not matter to you. I am going to do something that you could have saved me doing!”

“Geoffrey!” she called to him, “Geoff!”

He was at the door, but he did not wait.

“Wait!” she said, “wait, I will——”

“There is nothing else that I have to say to you,” he said. “I have to thank you for nothing. I behaved like a brute, and you encouraged me to do it; you——” He hesitated. “You put it into my head, I think. However, I shall fight my own battles!”

“Geoffrey!” she called, but he was gone. He went down the hotel stairs into the London street.

So 'Nid had gone back, and Bevanwood had accepted her, and Bevanwood was waiting for him to kill him. He was not afraid; with all his many faults he had not boasted when he said that he was not a coward.

He stood on the pavement for a minute considering, then he hailed a cab. He drove to the house of a man he knew and went in; his friend was taking his breakfast.

“I’ve come to ask a favour, I hope you will grant it without asking questions that I can’t answer. It is simply this—you own a revolver, I want you to lend it to me.”

“Going to commit murder?” the other asked with a smile.

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"I hope not—going to prevent one, I hope. Will you lend it?"

"Of course!" the other man said. "I'll get it."

An hour later Geoffrey Clare stood on the platform at Charing Cross, a ticket for Horswood, the nearest station to Bevanwood, in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LONELY ROAD

JIM'S occupation of the little cottage had made a vast change in its appearance. The renovation of the cottage had been his delight. He was a man who had to be doing something; what was more natural than that he should do the work that he particularly understood? The broken but mended door had disappeared, in its place was a smart, newly painted green door—the same with the broken window sashes and all the rest of the woodwork. He had built a pretty little porch over the doorway; he had trimmed and cleared away the tangle of creepers. Billy had assisted him with the garden that had been a wilderness. Flower beds had been dug and planted; flowers bloomed where there had been only tall, rank grass. The little path had been trimmed and rolled. Jim had lavished much bright green paint, fetched by Billy from Horswood, on the woodwork. It was a very attractive, pretty and smart little place now, this derelict old wreck, a place for a man to be proud and fond of, if he had rescued it—as Jim had done—with his own unaided hands from decay and rot.

In the quaint little porch that Jim had laboriously designed and carried out, he had built a seat, and on the seat 'Nid was sitting this warm, drowsy afternoon, sewing industriously.

Now and again she looked up, a sad little smile in her

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eyes and on her lips. She watched Jim working out there in the hot sunshine. He was bringing large, smooth, round pebbles from the bed of the stream with which to complete the little pathway.

Now he had finished, the path was complete, a cobbled pathway of large, smooth pebbles. It looked well, it had been neatly and truly laid. Jim straightened his back and looked about him, a pleased smile on his face. He was proud of his work here, proud of his path.

"The bridge next!" he muttered.

The bridge over the stream consisted only of a plank, and that somewhat sodden and rotten. Jim saw the plank removed, in its place a neat little ornamental bridge with a gate to it—it would give the finishing touch to his little domain. He called to 'Nid softly, and instantly she dropped her work and hurried to him.

"Don't look so bad, 'Nid, does it?" he said.

"It looks lovely!" she said, admiring the pathway.

"The next thing'll be the bridge," he said. He was intent on his plans; he described the bridge at length.

"We'll have a little white gate one end," he said. "Six supports'll be enough—come to that, the bridge is more for looks than anything else. Any one could 'op acrost the stream; why, even you could, 'Nid, with your little feet!"

"Yes!" she said. She looked down at her feet—they were certainly very small.

"But it's the finishing touch," he said. "That's what's wanted, and after that I think I did ought to put up a bit of a fence at the side there, and then I'll get some of that there tangle cleared at the back, and me and Billy'll turn the land up and plant it out."

"It—it'll be getting late for—for planting out, won't it,

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Jim?" she said, and her voice faltered. "It's scarcely summer now!"

The summer was waning, autumn was creeping down on them, after the autumn would come winter—winter! she shivered at the thought. Where would they all be when the winter came? He must go back, they would need him; he had his estate, his place in the world to fill, the place which she could never share with him now.

The winter—how she dreaded and feared it! She felt like a butterfly whose life ended with the summer-time. After the summer what would life hold for her? Nothing! For he must go, and without him—how empty, how desolate it would be!

"'Nid, you—you ain't——" He paused. "'Nid, you ain't crying?" he said.

"No," she said. "No, I ain't, Jim."

"I thought you was," he said.

When the summer should be gone—what then? God help her! She did not want to live, to live to see the winter. Like the butterfly that lived only in the sunshine, she wanted to die when she could no longer be in the sunshine of his presence.

"Jim."

He turned to her. "Yes, 'Nid?" he said.

"Jim, it—it 'ud be best——" she said. "It 'ud be best for me to go—go now. I—I can't live on like this, knowing that each day brings the time nearer and nearer."

He did not speak, he stood staring at the big round cobbles that he had dredged from the stream.

"The time's coming; every day, every hour brings it nearer. Jim, you'll have to go back, they want you.

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Billy'll have to go back, his mother'll want him, and then——" her voice died away. "Then——"

"'Nid, can't you be like me, just—just living on each day and not thinking about to-morrow?"

"But to-morrow comes, it must come, and to-morrow will be black and cold and empty, Jim."

"Black and cold and empty," he said. "Yes."

"Jim, Jim, you must go back; they want you, you've got to go back soon—soon, and I—I can't come with you, Jim."

"No," he said. "You can't come with me, 'Nid."

She knew it, she had always known it, yet to hear him say so now—it sounded like the knell of doom to her. She was shut out for ever from his life; in his life she could play no part, she had forfeited her place by his side, the place she had cared nothing for once. And now—oh, the difference! Oh, the need for him! What of those coming days when she should not hear his voice, when she could no longer see his face?

"So, Jim, wouldn't it be better if I was to go?" she whispered.

"Go where?" he said quietly.

"I don't know; it don't much matter, Jim, does it? Just go."

"Not yet," he said quietly. "Not yet, 'Nid; one day—soon perhaps—me and you'll talk it over, dear, and—and settle things, and you won't forget about Billy, 'Nid, will you, when——" He paused.

"I shan't be able to do anything about Billy," she said.

"Jim, you must do that, do it yourself."

"Why?" he asked. "You promised, 'Nid."

"Did I?" she said drearily. "I didn't ought to have promised, Jim, I can't promise nothing now—nothing."

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You see, I don't know where I shall be or what's going to happen, Jim; one can't promise much when one don't know, can one?"

He shook his head.

"We ain't been un'appy together 'ere, 'Nid, you and me and Billy——"

"Unhappy," she said, "unhappy?"

"It ain't a bad little place, one gets to be fond of a place like this; it—it's like 'ome, ain't it, 'Nid? More like 'ome than that big place yonder." He made a sweep with his arm in the direction of Bevanwood.

"That wasn't ever home," she said. "The other might have been—Pent Street, I mean. Only—only I wouldn't let it be; it was my fault, Jim, that ought to have been home for us both, but it wasn't; it was me, dear, not you. I spoiled it."

"You didn't," he said. "You never spoiled anything for me, never, except——" He paused.

'Nid turned her face away.

"I—I did ought to go, Jim," she whispered. "I must. Oh, Jim, you—you never forget it, never, never, not for one moment. You speak kindly to me and smile at me, and—and all the time—all the time I know you remember."

"I—I can't 'elp it, 'Nid," he said. "I can't 'elp it. I try not to—to remember, but I do, I do. I can't 'elp it. It isn't you, it isn't you, dear, I ain't bitter about you now; I never was. One day, perhaps, you'll understand that, 'Nid, I was never, never bitter about you, it was only—'im——" He paused. "I wanted to do the best for you, 'Nid. Always I knew it wasn't you, not your fault, you was such a baby, 'Nid, such a kid. You're only a baby now, 'Nid, you ain't fit to look after yourself, you

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ain't fit to go alone. Remember the last time when I found you asleep out there on the hills, you 'adn't gone far after all, 'Nid."

"No," she said. "But the parting's coming, Jim, the parting's coming; it's near the end of August now, September's coming, and then October, and then winter'll begin, and Billy'll have to go back, and you'll have to go back, and—and me, I—oh, Jim, I daren't—daren't look forward to it, it makes me cold. I daren't think what'll come to us all when the summer days have passed and gone. It'll be so different then."

He moved towards her, he put his hand on her shoulder. "'Nid, I been thinking for you all the time, it's for you, gel. I'll arrange something, don't—don't worry."

"How can I help it? How can I help worrying?"

"I know," he said. "It's 'ard and rough, 'ard on us both, 'Nid, but we can't 'elp it now. We can't alter anything that's been, nor what's coming," he added. "Don't cry, gel, don't cry; I'm going up to the mill, when I come back there'll be a smiling face, won't there?"

"Yes, Jim," she said softly. "There'll always be a smiling face for you when you come."

"That's right, gel," he said. He looked down at her, his plain face looked less plain than usual now, there was a great love and tenderness in his eyes, a great, great longing that would never be appeased.

"She ain't mine, she was never mine. She can never be mine. Just standing up before that there clergyman never made 'er really mine," he thought. "So long as 'e lives she belongs to 'im and 'e to 'er. When 'e's gone she'll be free—free, free of 'im and of me, too, then. She's young yet, only a kid, and maybe in time she'll

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forget. Maybe some one else'll come along. She's only a kid yet, some one else may 'elp 'er to forget when she's free of 'im, and that—that means being free of me, too, free of us both."

He looked back when he had stepped across the stream, he saw her there standing in the porch watching him. He waved his hand to her, but she did not wave back, for she could only see him indistinctly through the most of her tears.

Go—yes, she knew; where she would go she knew when the time came for parting. There was but one road for her to take. She shivered a little for she was young and afraid, afraid of the darkness and the loneliness of that road by which she must travel alone, as all must.

He was gone now; she saw him far, far away in the distance, breasting the green swell of the hills. She stretched out her empty arms to him; her eyes watched him till the distance swallowed him and still her arms were held out. A smiling face when he came back—yes, that was the least she could do. But she knew that when the summer days were gone, when he and Billy must go back, she knew the road that lay before her, the road that she must take alone.

CHAPTER XXXV

"FATE!"

SO he breasted the hills and strode away through the afternoon sunshine towards the mill in the misty distance. The gorse flowers were in bloom, the turf was soft and springing under foot, the air was filled with the hum of busy insects, and in the far distance a figure was coming towards him, the figure of a man, but Jim Bevanwood did not see it.

The summer days were ending. Life at their little cottage in the hollow was ending for them, too, and then—— One way for him, another for 'Nid. His way he knew—hers was all indistinct, uncertain to him. He looked up and paused—a smile came into his face, for he knew suddenly that the thing that he had always known must happen had happened now. So he would play his part; the parting of the ways had come sooner than he had thought, sooner than he had looked for. It had come while the summer-time was still with them.

The man was coming towards him, had seen him and was hastening to him. So they would meet at last out here on these green hills, man to man, armed with the weapons that nature had given to them; so here they would meet and fight their last fight and it would end in freedom for 'Nid.

Jim knew how the battle must end, knew himself for infinitely the stronger man. And when it was ended he

“Fate!”

would go back no more to the cottage—he would go on and on to some town where he would give himself up, where he would admit all and wait the result, the inevitable result.

He had known the man in the far distance, knew instinctively that he could make no mistake. The man had stopped now.

“Bevanwood,” he cried, “Bevanwood, I have come to——”

“I know,” Jim said, “I know. I knew sooner or later you’d come; I been waiting for you.” He kept on his advance.

“Keep back,” the man said; “I want to speak to you; stand where you are.”

But Jim took no notice; he flung off his coat, ragged and disreputable old coat that it was, and still he advanced. There was something in his voice, something terrible in its quiet, passionless expression.

“Bevanwood, I tell you I have something to say to you. Listen—stand where you are, stand still or by——” The voice cracked with a note of sudden terror, for this man advancing on him looked like Fate itself. He never paused, never hesitated, and then suddenly the other knew fear, frantic fear.

“Keep back, keep back! Listen, for God’s sake, listen!” he cried hoarsely. “I tell you——”

“It’s me and you met at last. I been waiting for you. I got to do what I promised myself. It ’ad to come; it was Fate itself—Fate as brought you ’ere to-day. You and me meeting on these ’ills——” His hands were outstretched, his face expressionless, only his eyes glittered.

“Keep back, man, keep back, in God’s name, keep back! Listen, you must listen—Bevanwood, for God’s sake,

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listen, give me—one moment—do you hear—one.” And then fear, a mad, wild, unreasoning fear came to him. He saw those great, powerful hands stretched out to grasp him, he saw in those hands and in this man’s eyes death, and he knew why—because she had not told this man the truth; and now the man would not listen. He was mad—mad. He knew that once he was in that grip it would mean the end for him; but he would not die because of this man’s folly—because this fool would not listen. He had something yet that would save him, and so he sprang aside and the other man turned after him, laughing hoarsely as though in derision of his effort to escape.

And then as he leaped Clare stumbled and fell to his knees and saw the other man towering above him, saw inevitable death, and in his terror he pressed the trigger again and again, and yet again, scarcely knowing what he was doing, only realising that, come what might, he himself must still live.

And then he saw the other man stand suddenly, saw him sway, saw a puzzled look come into his face, grown suddenly ghastly, and for a moment he stood there, rocking strangely backwards and forwards, to fall at last heavily, face downward, with arms flung out upon the turf.

Dazed with the horror of it all, Clare knelt there, staring at the great bulk of the man lying so motionless. Had he done this? What would others say? Say that it was murder? Murder—God knew, God knew that it was not; it was self-protection. He had not wished to fire; he had been driven to it in self-defence. Self-defence—who would believe that? Had he not brought the pistol with him?

“Fate!”

Thoughts, fears seemed to tumble through his brain. He stood up hesitating and undecided. The terror of immediate death at this man's hands had given place to a frantic fear of consequences, the fear of a death infinitely more shameful, a death that it was utterly impossible for him to escape. Had not the people in the village seen him come this way to-day? Had there not been a dozen who had recognised him? Some even had wished him good-day and had called him by his name. He thought of all this, of the net that was closing about him.

And then the mists of terror cleared; for the moment all that was generous in him came uppermost. He put self aside, he fell on his knees beside the body and, heavy as it was, he raised it in his arms and held Bevanwood's head against his breast.

“Bevanwood, Bevanwood, can you hear—can you hear me now? Can you understand? Try—try and answer, try and tell me that you hear, Bevanwood——”

For James Bevanwood's eyes were wide and staring eyes that held no intelligence, but the sound of that frantic voice seemed to rouse him, to pierce the mists; the eyes wandered over the green hills, towards that shimmering belt of gold that was the sea, then came back slowly until they rested on the face of the man who held him.

“Bevanwood, can you hear me? Can you understand me? I came to find you, to tell you the truth, but you would not listen.” There was a wail of despair in the voice. “But you would not listen. Oh, man, man, you gave me no chance, no time. I wanted to tell you the truth, how she fled from me—Bevanwood—can you hear? Try—try and answer me—for I came to tell you

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and I must tell you, though God knows it means little enough to me now, and perhaps but little to you, Bevanwood. Can you hear me?"

Bevanwood's eyes stared up into the man's face, yet he made no answer, gave no sign.

"Before God and as God above hears me, she is pure—pure and innocent, as innocent as on that day when I first saw her. I loved her, I thought my love had triumphed, and in my triumph I forgot—caution—I kissed her madly, I know it now; then I saw sudden fear, hatred, repulsion in her face. I saw her horror of me, and then I understood that I had failed—failed. Do you hear me, Bevanwood? Can you understand? I saw her horror of me—horror and shame—for then, I believe that for the first time she understood. I laughed at it then, I thought it would pass. Bevanwood, you hear me? You do hear me, man?"

"I 'ear," Bevanwood whispered.

"And you believe, you must, for you must know that I have nothing to gain. I don't even know now why I should tell you this, yet I came to tell you—the truth. My sister could have told you. I tell you that on that first day 'Nid left me, fled from me; I have never seen her since. She went as she came, an innocent child, Bevanwood. I have nothing to gain now by lying. I am not lying. God above knows that I am telling you the truth. You hear me, man, you hear me?"

The labouring chest rose and fell convulsively, a thin stream of blood trickled slowly from the breast, it dropped sluggishly to the ground and soaked into the green turf, making a great black and ever-growing patch. He heard, but he could not answer; the eye-lids flickered, a slow smile came into his face.

"Fate!"

"Heaven knows I did not mean it," Clare moaned. "I didn't mean it, I did not know what I was doing; you—you wouldn't listen, you were coming on me, you wouldn't stop. If you had stopped, only for a moment, only a moment so—so that I could make you understand; I tell you I didn't know what I was doing; I saw death and I was afraid for the moment. I—I knew that I might still live, so——"

"She—she is——" Jim Bevanwood whispered. "She is—is——"

"Innocent, pure, chaste," the other said. "I swear it. She fled from me in horror; there was no wrong to you or to her, none, as God hears me."

Into the white face there came a slow smile.

"I—I did ought to have listened," he whispered. "Only I didn't think. I—I never thought it—it might be different. It was my fault, not yours. You've got to 'urry, 'urry. I've got to shelter you—there's time yet. Put it down 'ere into my 'and, that thing, the thing you shot me with, into my 'and, then go—go and bring 'em quickly. I'm going to clear you; my—my own fault, I done it myself, you understand? Done it myself, remember that. Only 'urry, 'urry while there's time and tell 'er—after—tell 'er you told me and I understood the truth—tell 'er it's all right. Tell 'Nid—you will?"

Geoffrey Clare left him lying there on the hillside, the revolver gripped in his hand, and he ran—ran like a hunted man, ran to the village white-faced and shaking with horror.

"There's been an accident. Sir James Bevanwood is dying—shot—shot himself; he's living yet—hurry, hurry to him, hurry!"

The police and the village doctor drove out over the

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Downs to the place in the police car and Clare went with them.

Jim Bevanwood's eyes were opened; he was still conscious.

"I'm glad you come," he whispered. "I wanted to say I—I done it myself; it was an accident. I was looking at it; I didn't understand much about them things, I didn't know it was loaded. You understand, you 'ear? 'E ain't to blame. It was my own fault. I tell you I done it myself. I didn't know. It's true, it's truth." He paused "Will you tell 'er, tell my wife—tell 'er—I loved——" He paused.

Beyond the yellow blaze of the gorse flowers he could see the horizon of the sea, he could see the glint of a tiny white sail in the sunlight. How she had loved the sea. He remembered the rapt look in her eyes that first time she had seen it; the sea and 'Nid were somehow always inseparable in his mind. He was glad to lay here watching the sea. It was almost 'Nid herself; and then the gorse flowers faded and the sunlight was gone and the blackness stole down on him.

"It was my fault—no one's fault, only mine," he said.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE FINISHING OF THE BRIDGE

'NID stared open-eyed; in her eyes was astonishment and a little fear. She shrank back at the sight of the man. She put her hands against her breast. Why had he come? She had hoped and thought never to see him again.

"'Nid," he said. "'Nid, he—he wants you; he's hurt, 'Nid; it—it was an accident."

"What have you done?" she asked quietly. "What have you done?" She spoke calmly, even though her heart was throbbing with fear.

"Nothing, I tell you; it was an accident; they have carried him home to his house. He wants you—you are to follow. I have come for you."

"I—I can't," she said. "I can't go there; he—he don't want that."

"But he does—he sent me. He wants you and there is no time to lose; you must come at once."

Billy had come upon them both.

"Is 'e 'urt, is Jim 'urt?" he asked.

"Yes," Clare said, "badly hurt—it was an accident. I tried to tell him—but he would not listen; then it happened. 'Nid, will you come?"

"I can't go there, not to his house," she said. "I can't, you—you know I can't, you know I can't."

He looked at her wonderingly. "I know of no reason

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why you should not. Besides, he wishes it, and there's no time to lose."

"You best go," Billy said in a low, shocked voice. "You know what Jim is—'e likes 'is own way; if 'e says you're to go, you'd best go."

"But——" 'Nid said.

"We are losing time," Clare said. "You must—must come. Don't you understand? He is dying."

"Yes, I think I understood that," 'Nid said. "I knew somehow." She showed no grief, her face was very set and white. Jim dying and she had meant to die; it would not alter her intention, it would only make it the more certain. After all, the road might not be so lonely—was she selfish to think of that?

"And he wants me?" she said.

"He sent me for you—you must follow at once."

"I will come," she said quietly. "Billy, you—you come with me; I'd like you to be with me, Billy."

So they went together, tramping across the Downs, passing through the village. They knew in the village—there was grief on their shocked faces. They saw 'Nid and bobbed their curtseys to her, but the shadow of the tragedy lay heavily on them all. Sir James was dying, they had carried him home to die; there had been an accident and every one in the village was conscious of a sense of personal loss.

Mrs. Wasser stood at her door. "You, Billy?" she said. "Where you been this long time?"

"With 'im," Billy said; "and I'm going to 'im now, mother, 'e wants me and 'Nid."

She nodded; she put her apron to her eyes.

So 'Nid came to the house that she had never thought to enter again, and there was a strange stillness, an un-

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canny silence reigning over it. Servants came soft-footed, stared at her and then went away again. There was something that hung heavily in the atmosphere. Jim was right—this place could never be home-like, never like the little cottage with its green-painted door, never!

She went into the huge drawing-room; she thought to see Miss Clare there, but the place was empty. She stood there, a lonely little figure, shivering in the middle of the vast square of the carpet.

The door opened, a man came in—the local doctor. He took her cold hand. "Sir Walter is on his way," he said. "We wired for him at once. He will be here in half an hour. Your husband wishes to see you. Will you come?"

She did not answer; she went with him up the stairs. It was all like some dream. She was back here again, but she felt like a stranger, an outcast. Jim had never meant that she should come back—she knew that. It had never entered into his plans, and yet she was back and he had sent for her and wanted to see her.

"You will be very brave and control yourself?" the doctor whispered. "I trust you, Lady Bevanwood."

She started at the sound of the name, the name she had not heard for months, then she stole into the room.

Jim lay there on the bed, his face strangely white, but his eyes were open. Very, very slightly he turned his head as she came in.

"'Nid!" he said; "'Nid, gel—'Nid!"

"Jim, you didn't mean me to come, but he—he said you sent for me."

"It's right, 'Nid!" he whispered; "I sent for you, 'Nid. There's been somethink wrong, somethink I didn't quite understand. I understand now, dear; you're the

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same, just the same; you didn't belong to no one but me, 'Nid! Do you remember that night, the night when I was asleep with—with my arms on the table?"

"Yes!" she said.

"And you—you come in and crep' to me, 'Nid, and kissed my 'ead and said somethink. Do you remember?"

"Yes!"

"I'd like to 'ear you say that again, 'Nid!" he said softly. "Just once again."

"You—you want me to?" she said. "Jim, you want——" She crept to him. "I didn't mean wrong, dear, I didn't know; and then—then when 'e—'e tried to kiss me I hated him; oh, I knew all of a sudden it was wrong and wicked and I hated him! Jim, you don't understand!"

"I do, 'Nid," he said. "I do understand, gel, I know! And it was me arter all you cared for, old Jim?"

A sob broke from her; she went to him, she hung over him.

"May—may I kiss you, Jim?" she whispered.

"May you!" His eyes smiled up to hers. "Isn't it what I want—want more than I do even life, even now, when life means somethink? Kiss me, 'Nid, my—my gel, kiss me and tell me again what you told me that night, tell me——"

"I love you, oh, I love you, I love you!" she said.

And that was what he wanted to hear, only that.

'Nid and Billy Wasser sat in the big drawing-room; they crouched closely together side by side, clasping one another's hands. There was a great stillness, an unbroken silence in the house. Outside in the hall Geoffrey Clare was waiting. The passing minutes were heavy

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with doom, with dread. He was suffering and praying as he had never prayed in his life. He wondered dimly how so much agony and so much fear could be crowded into so short a space of time. An hour ago—two hours—an eternity since the doctor from town had come. He had lost count of time, he had lived through the ages it seemed to him. "If he dies I shall tell the truth; I'll face it if he dies—I won't let him save me!" he thought.

There was a movement at last, the sound of distant, subdued voices, the creak of a board under a man's weight. They were coming down, talking in low voices, and the man in the hall waited as a criminal waits to hear the verdict.

They came into sight round the bend of the stairs, the little stout village doctor and the tall, lean, grave-looking surgeon from town.

"This is Mr. Clare, a relation of Sir James," the local doctor said.

Geoffrey did not speak; he looked at the tall stranger.

"A very satisfactory result, Mr. Clare," he said, "but a near thing! An inch to the left and——" He went on speaking, but Geoffrey did not follow, did not understand.

"Will he live?"

"Live—I have every reason to believe so. Did I not say that it was all very satisfactory? Yes, he will most certainly live, so far as the hurts of to-day are concerned. Three or four weeks should see him on his legs again."

"Yes!" Geoffrey Clare said—he scarcely knew what he said. Jim Bevanwood would live; that meant that

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he too would live. It was life for both, as it would have been death for both.

"May I—I tell her?" he said.

"Of course! Carry her the good news by all means!"

So he went to 'Nid and Billy, and they lifted their white faces and stared at him.

"It—it is all right; he will live—it's over!" Geoffrey said shakily. "'Nid, don't you understand? It's over; he—he'll be all right! You—you do understand, don't you, 'Nid? Jim will live—the hurt wasn't so bad as we thought; he'll pull through, 'Nid!"

She did not speak, she only clasped her little hands together tightly. Billy broke into blubbering; he had borne up bravely till now—now he went under and flung himself face downward on the sofa and cried.

"'Nid, I've got something to say!" Geoffrey said. "You—you've got to know the truth; he didn't mean any one to. But I'm going to tell you—I—I did it! He meant to kill me; he didn't give me time to tell him how—how you ran from me that night, how you hated me because I—I kissed you; he didn't give me time. He came to me to kill me; I knew that he meant to kill me—my sister told me. She could have told him the truth, but she didn't; you could have told him!"

"What was there for me to tell?" she said.

He looked at her. "Nothing," he said, "nothing, dear, you—you didn't understand. But I did it, you understand that? I fired at him. I was afraid—afraid of my life. When he knew afterwards he wanted to protect me; he said it was an accident, and it was, 'Nid, it was. Only——"

"And he—he's going to live?" 'Nid said.

Had she heard or had she not? He did not know,

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he never did know. Perhaps there was no need for her to hear; she may have known all along.

"He's going to live. In a few weeks he will be himself, well and strong as ever again, 'Nid—'Nid, you'll tell him I'm glad, won't you? I'm going now; I only waited to hear the—the best or the worst."

'Nid had turned; she put her hand on Billy's heaving shoulder, she bent to him, she laid her cheek against his.

"Billy," she said, "Billy, he's going to live."

And when she looked up again Geoffrey Clare had gone, yet she never noticed it—she had forgotten him.

The little bridge was finished, it was a triumph of art and skill. 'Nid had designed it because Jim had asked her to and 'Nid had never designed a bridge before in her life. Still, what did that matter?

"It looks proper and fine, don't it, 'Nid?" Jim said.

She stood beside him and he slipped his arm around her.

"It looks perfect, Jim," she said. "And it belongs to us—it's home, real home. But, Jim, the—the winter's coming." Her voice broke a little.

"But it'll go, gel," he said; "and then the spring'll come and me and you'll come back 'ome again."

"And Billy?" she said. She lifted her head. Billy was sawing and whistling cheerily over his task.

"And the winter won't be so long passing, 'Nid," Jim said; "and we'll know it's our place, we'll know it's 'ere waiting for us to come back to it when the spring time comes."

She crept a little closer to him. This evening a chill breeze came over the Downs from the sea, it brought

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the yellow leaves rustling down. Yellow leaves drifted on the surface of the stream at their feet.

"And—and even that other we—we might make like home," she said. "It's big and cold and not like this, Jim, yet still it could be a little like home."

He put both his arms around her and tilted her head backwards so that he could see into her eyes, and seeing into them, he could look into the soul of her and knew it all for his own.

"Where you are, 'Nid, where we are together, gel, it's going to be 'ome."

"This is home," she said; "home for me with your arms round me, Jim. It's all I want in the world."

He smiled down at her; the trees rustled in the breeze, a few more red and yellow leaves drifted down and alighted softly on the surface of the stream to be borne away.

From the faggot heap behind the cottage Billy's whistle sounded loud, shrill and persistent.

THE END







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